

Caroline Paley  
ENGL 199-08  
Professor Uman  
May 2, 2017

Strength in Numbers: The Power of Alliances in *The Handmaid's Tale* and 2017 Women's  
March on Washington

There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men. But they were smaller than you might have thought, I guess people were scared. And when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. A few things were blown up...But you couldn't even be sure who was doing it. It could have been the army, to justify the computer searches and the other ones, the door-to-doors. (Atwood 180)

Margaret Atwood captivates her readers as she spins the tale of a futuristic version of our own world after a totalitarian regime takes over. She welcomes the readers to the new, radical society, formerly the United States, known now as the Republic of Gilead. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood tells the story of a woman in this dystopian future who, like so many others, has been stripped of all her liberties and whose sole purpose is to reproduce for the overall good of society. Birth rates have declined and many citizens are sterile due to environmental pollution and rampant outbreaks of sterilizing STD's and STI's. The result is a nation starving for children. The religion-based totalitarian government has no tolerance for dissent and reprimands offenders swiftly, with lethal methods of punishment. At the risk of their own lives, multiple characters in the novel engage in illicit alliances with the main character, Offred, a Handmaid, as they navigate the strict laws set forth by the dictatorial governing body. These rebellious alliances, though varying in effectiveness and motives, are all forms of

resistance against a totalitarian administration. By looking at the use of alliances as a form of dissent in the dystopian society of Gilead and similar groups and movements that exist today, we can see the use of partnerships to rebel against a powerful government is essential so we can move forward actively resisting in hopes of reform and a better future.

One of the most frequently referenced alliances in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the one shared by the Handmaids who are trained and take part in ritualistic events together. Handmaids are live-in servants whose only duty is to be impregnated and bare a child for the assigned Commander and his wife. Offred describes one of her initial encounters with some of her fellow Handmaids when she first arrives at the Red Center; a strict and unforgiving government sanctioned training location for all fertile women:

The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts... We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip read... In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (4)

On the surface we see five women seeking each other's companionship in a time of heightened security in a world where suddenly each one has been stripped of her rights. As we look closer, we see the small act of resistance that stems from the support they gain from one another. As they are watched over by the Aunts, the hostile and strict instructors of the Handmaids, they learn to adapt to their environment. The Handmaids start by daring to share their original names, a resistant act. In the world of Gilead, nothing from the past is acknowledged. Everything has been erased including their former lives. By willingly sharing their prior names, these

Handmaids are breaking the law by indulging in the past that the government is so determined to obliterate. They are resurrecting their past lives, their identities, by simply uttering their first names. Atwood indicates that the Handmaids also learn to lip-read and whisper soundlessly; they are responding to their harsh environment by going against the rules and seeking support from each other. They are no longer alone; they reach out to one another. The Handmaids grasp each other's hands in solidarity. Although on the surface human contact and communication may seem to only play a minute and simple role in resistance, it is also true that resistance in any form can still have an effect or lead to something greater. In this case the illicit communication and use of human contact leads to a greater trust in each other and further support. They will learn to keep each other's secrets; they will resist together.

The bond shared by the Handmaids does not cease when they leave the training center as demonstrated by Offred and another Handmaid on Janine's Birth Day. Janine, now known as Ofwarren, is preparing to give birth and as a result the neighboring Handmaids are authorized to attend and lend their support. Her pregnancy is seen as a victory for not only the Warren household but for this society with declining birth rates. As the women chant, Offred attempts to gain information:

I receive a cup, lean to the side to pass it, and the woman next to me says, low in my ear, "Are you looking for anyone?" "Moira," I say just as low... I don't know this woman; she wasn't at the Center with me... "I'll watch for you." ... I want to tell her my name but Aunt Elizabeth raises her head, staring around the room, she must have heard a break in the chant, so there's no more time. (124)

Offred is playing the part, outwardly, of an obedient Handmaid while continuing to resist in small ways. She knows to speak low and directly in the ear, and times the conversation while the

others chant rhythmically encouraging Ofwarren. Offred is so highly aware of her surroundings that she knows when it is no longer safe to continue the conversation. Her trust in the other Handmaid, we learn, is not misplaced. She whispers back, affirming the belief that there is a bond between Handmaids, an understanding. The understanding is that they will aid one another when possible and rebel together even in the smallest form.

Communication between the Handmaids demonstrates the resilience of their sisterhood, something Offred thrives on throughout the novel as she is stripped of most forms of intimate conversation. Ginette Katz-Roy closely examines this sisterhood in her essay entitled, "Sexual Politics and Textual Strategies in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," and discusses the many uses of resistance in the book:

Solidarity develops between the oppressed women even though Offred remembers how Luke [Offred's husband] said that there was no word with feminine connotations corresponding to "Fraternize." This "sororization," to use a word which, significantly, does not exist, is the first manifestation of the women's resistance. (Katz-Roy 125)

Sororization is a non-existent word Offred coins to describe the sisterhood, which, as Katz-Roy sums up, is the female equivalent to fraternization, or to fraternize. Sororization is significant to the novel because the characters are living in a patriarchy that revolves around the control of its citizens, mainly its women. A bond or sisterhood is something that Offred and the other Handmaid's can depend on. They are no longer isolated in an unforgiving world; they have support. However, in this dystopian world it seems women of equal class stick together and scorn all others. The Commanders' wives lean on one other and look down upon Handmaids and Econo-wives (lower class wives), the Econo-wives look down upon Handmaids and

Commander's wives, but the Handmaids seem to scorn no other women. They only look on longingly, dreaming of a time when they had more control of their lives.

Katz-Roy continues to support the idea that communication, like the conjuring of words such as "sororization", is not only potent but is sometimes all we have to "link ourselves with others" and "break our isolation" (Katz-Roy 126). Not only does Offred "sororize" with her fellow Handmaids, but also by doing so she is supporting the resistance. She is breaking her isolation and linking herself to others by forming relationships and steadfast bonds. Language in the form of intimate communication possesses the hidden power to promote camaraderie between those Handmaids willing to rebel.

Another major alliance that does not stem from the sisterhood of the Handmaids, but is strengthened by it, is Offred's friendship with Moira. Through flashbacks we see Offred has prior experiences with Moira before she joins her at the Red Center, pre-Gilead. We learn they were college friends who maintained their relationship up until the Gileadian government took power. When Moira arrives at the training center, Offred is both shocked and excited to see her friend but must remain expressionless and aloof. Their past lives have been erased; their friendship must remain a secret. The two women arrange, wordlessly, to meet in the bathroom on various occasions; there is only supervision on the outside:

In the washroom I go to the second-last stall, as usual. Are you there? I whisper... What have you heard? I ask her. Nothing much. I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats...I'll fake sick. They'll send an ambulance; I've seen it... They'll find you out... Time's up, said the voice of Aunt Elizabeth...Two of Moira's fingers appeared, through the hole in the wall...I touched my own fingers to them, quickly, held on. Let go. (89-90)

Offred fears for her friend and herself as Moira becomes restless and ultimately escapes from the Red Center. Moira is cunning, even beginning to scheme with Offred in the bathroom; she is willing to risk it all for a chance at freedom. Could she feign being sick? Moira knows they would send an ambulance, a way out. Offred fears for her friend urging her not to try anything. The Handmaids are interrupted and must disperse. The two women touch before parting, a small signal that they are united and resisting what is expected of them.

Throughout the book, human contact, because it is so limited, is something Offred craves. The only government approved contact is her monthly visits to the doctor and her nights of mandated intercourse with her Commander in the lap of his wife. Katz-Roy describes the possession of one's body in the world of Gilead, "There is no privacy, not even for the Commanders and their wives. These public rituals aim at convincing the individual that his/her body is not private property, that it belongs to the community and must serve its interests" (123). Gilead is a collective society and privacy is the sacrifice made, without permission from its citizens, to maintain order. Katz-Roy makes the distinct point that the body is no longer treated as private property but as a public interest. The fact that the body is no longer a personal and private possession makes Offred's intimate and discreet moments of human contact all the more thrilling and rebellious. Touching hands with fellow Handmaids in the mask of the dark and even gripping Moira's fingers by her own through a crude hole between bathroom stalls strengthens the bond and demonstrates that human contact, in Gilead, is a resistant act.

Although both Moira and Offred share superficial similarities: their gender, their situation, their new occupation, Peter G. Stillman and Anne S. Johnson argue in their article, "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*," that Moira in some ways is Offred's more daring alter ego: "If Offred is an everywoman, Moira is her opposite. She is an

exception, an outsider, a rebel, a maverick. She is a woman engaged fully in the world surrounding her, not mired in romantic fantasies about the past and present” (79). Moira is daring and unafraid to resist outwardly, as demonstrated when she eventually breaks out of the center by capturing one of the supervising Aunts, tying her up, and stealing her clothes. We also learn that Moira’s sexuality strays from what is expected of women in this new society. She identifies herself as a lesbian and, in the eyes of society, is not using her eggs properly. Stillman and Johnson suggest that Moira truly sees the new world, as well as the previous one, for its shortcomings. Moira is not caught up in illusions provided so graciously by the government and is more engaged in the world of the rebellion than Offred. Offred also suggests, through flashes of memory, that Moira has always had a rebellious spirit. She, herself, refrains from violent and obvious acts of resistance and sticks to her silent methods of dissent shared with the majority of her fellow handmaids.

Offred gains some closure after her friend vanishes when they are reunited one last time after Moira’s daring escape from the Red Center. She encounters Moira, briefly, when Offred recognizes her at a brothel known as Jezebel’s. Moira is working as a prostitute and has given up all attempts to rebel against the regime. In her article entitled, “Selves, Survival, and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Elisabeth Hansot closely analyzes Offred and Moira’s final encounter:

What frightens Offred is the indifference, the lack of volition of the new Moira she finds at Jezebel's. This mask, the mask of a tart, appears to have become Moira's face, obliterating the larger-than-life rebel. "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin.... I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat.” (Hansot 65)

Hansot uses Offred's words and phrases such as "larger-than-life", "gallantry", "heroism", and "swashbuckling" to describe her previous view of Moira; she was revered for her spirit and determination to rebel. That fire appears to be absent in their final encounter. Words like "indifference" and "obliterating" are used to describe the new, defeated Moira. Offred, in response, is devastated by the realization that Moira is no longer her hero and although their alliance stays intact, in the end, how can they truly be allies if only one is willing to engage in the resistance?

Offred often rebels inwardly by forming words, whispering, and sharing human contact while Moira engages outwardly by escaping the Red Center and, in the time before Gilead, taking part in marches and protests against the government. The act of inwardly versus outwardly rebelling seems to be gendered. Historically, women are seen as submissive, quiet, and were often confined to the home. Likewise, Offred continues to play her submissive role and dissents behind closed doors in secret. Men, however, seem to be known for resisting in a resounding manner like fighting, yelling, and even going to war over a conflict of belief. They seem to resist outwardly, like Moira, though she is not a man, while women resist quietly in the submissive manner that is instilled by the government. By looking at rebellion as gendered, we can see that the book itself displays majorly feminine resistance from the main character. However, some characters behave contrary to what is expected of them based on their gender. Offred's Commander practices inward or feminine resistance by breaking rules behind closed doors in the safety of his home. Moira is another example who, as I have mentioned, is an obvious rebel, a female engaging in masculine methods of resistance. This further complicates the belief that resistance is truly gendered. Offred is also generally faced with issues based on her gender such as her lack of reproductive rights.



Moira is not the only Handmaid Offred encounters in her new life that is deeply engrossed in the rebellion. Offred's shopping partner, Ofglen, as we later learn, is an active member in the resistance against the Gileadian government and takes part in a mix of both inward and outward rebellion though she is female. In their initial interactions, they sustain government-sanctioned small talk with one another until Ofglen takes a risk and engages Offred in more serious matters revealing that they are both against the government: "I thought you were a true believer," Ofglen says... 'You can join us,'... 'Us?' I say. There is an *Us* then, there's a *We*. I knew it... But I can't believe it; hope is rising in me like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening" (168-169). Offred compares the sudden hope she has to a bloody wound. There is an opening, a chance. Offred is filled with hope that maybe her future isn't destined to be a Handmaid forever, that maybe, somehow, if others are rebelling, there's a chance that this new government will not last. Ofglen is as shocked as Offred to learn they share a similar goal to engage in rebellion against the government. Offred is even more thrilled to find out that she is not alone anymore; there are others who are working with the resistance as well. Ofglen even teaches her a safe word that reveals those who are also in the underground movement. In a common conversation, you casually bring up the phrase "may day" and then both parties will be aware of the other's allegiances (202).

Ofglen cautiously ushers Offred into the world of the resistance as they continue their illicit conversations. At the Salvaging, better described as mass murder by Handmaids against a prisoner of the regime, Ofglen blows her cover. She knocks out the prisoner, a member of the resistance, before he is attacked by the crazed women, keeping his secrets safe and sparing him the agony of his own brutal demise (280). The government does not take acts of rebellion lightly and Offred begins to fear for both her life and Ofglen's.

Shortly after the incident, Offred meets her shopping partner for their daily expedition only to find she has been replaced. The new Ofglen may be with the rebellion or in support of Gilead but Offred has no way of knowing. In her article, "Moving Beyond 'The Blank White Spaces': Atwood's Gilead, Postmodernism, And Strategic Resistance," Marta Caminero-Santangelo closely interprets the delicate encounter; Offred must tread carefully:

"Let that be a reminder to us," says the new Ofglen finally. I say nothing at first, because I am trying to make out what she means. She could mean that this is a reminder to us of the unjustness and brutality of the regime. In that case I ought to say yes. Or she could mean the opposite that we should remember to do what we are told and not get into trouble, because if we do we will be rightfully punished. If she means that, I should say praise be. (Atwood 284) The new Ofglen's words might belong to one discourse, that of subversion, or to another, that of the regime. The Handmaid, constructed at the intersection of these discourses, can insert herself into one or the other through her response. Her choice--"I take a chance. 'Yes,' I say" (285). (Santangelo 5)

Ultimately, Offred is debating whether or not she should risk her cover as a member of the dissenting party because clearly, she doesn't know whether to trust this new Ofglen or not. Offred, in a matter of seconds, must decipher the context of the stranger's words. Is she resisting or conforming? Whose side is she on? Offred makes a grave error in her response and learns she cannot trust this new Ofglen. After careful deliberation before answering Offred still ruins her carefully fabricated facade. The new Ofglen's response is government approved and the realization of the misstep Offred has made seeps in. She knows that the new Handmaid is warning her. The new Ofglen knows about the resistance but she is not one of them. Offred

begins to worry that the original Ofglen has been caught and that she too will be caught. However, the new Ofglen dispels her silent questions by responding that the original Ofglen committed suicide shortly after she learned the government was coming for her. Death, she believed, was the only answer.

Offred's alliances are dwindling as Moira leaves her behind and Ofglen dies, leaving her with one of her remaining partners in the rebellion, her Commander. Her Commander begins by inviting her to his private study to talk freely with her and indulge in a few games of Scrabble, an illicit game. Offred feels uneasy, "You must find this strange," he says. I simply look at him... I feel like cotton candy: sugar and air. Squeeze me and I'd turn into a small sickly damp wad of weeping pinky-red. "I guess it is a little strange," he says (138)." Offred looks up at him cautiously and listens without responding. She compares herself to cotton candy to express her uneasiness. Any movement toward her and she would collapse into a heap, a mess. She is light as the sugar and air concoction. Offred uses words like "sickly" and "weeping" to change the light hearted connotation that is associated with the carnival treat. They play Scrabble and the meetings continue frequently. He talks to her freely about the government and its rules; the Commander feels he can bend them and we later learn, he is not the only Commander who does so. The alliance becomes more equal when Offred begins to gain things for keeping his secrets. She receives first, hand lotion, then magazines, and even asks to hear what's truly going on in the world (188). She wants to learn the truth beyond the government sanctioned programming she views on the television.

Human contact begins to complicate the already uncertain partnership for Offred. The Commander wants affection, which she feigns obediently. He asks for pecks on the lips and even intercourse beyond the mandated monthly ritual. Human contact in itself begins to take on a

silent form of resistance. It goes on beyond closed doors where no one can see or hear it. Human contact can also be considered a form of silent communication. The Commander and Offred share an understanding that they will keep each other's secrets as their relationship deepens. Although the Commander means no harm by rebelling against the government's laws, he still is dissenting and even encouraging Offred to do the same through his actions.

Finally, Offred's determination to resist is shaken after her hero, Moira, gives up on rebelling, which lands her in the comfort and security of the arms of her final ally. Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, is originally supposed to be used only to get pregnant quickly through secret meetings for intercourse and the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, masterminds the plan. Soon, however, Offred finds she is craving his touch, his companionship, "I went back to Nick...on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely...being here with him is safety (268-269). She acknowledges that there was no reason for it and that Serena is no longer in on her plan but Offred keeps going back to him. Nick is her safety in the harsh world they live in. Human contact and silent communication is the backdrop for this alliance. Touch plays a key role in forming alliances because sharing and trusting your body in the hands of someone else is far from a simple decision. By entrusting someone with such a vital part of you, you are sharing with them not just your body but they are sharing theirs. Human contact can even be considered feminine because women are historically gentle and often characterized as fragile. The nature of human contact is also fragile and gentle. Silent communication arises during their encounters as well. Offred and Nick barely talk when they are together except for basic pleasantries. They demonstrate trust in one another by using their bodies. Offred even begins to suspend her rebellious beliefs; she would rather stay in the Commander's household so she can stay with

Nick. With Moira and Ofglen gone whom can she turn to? Nick is the only person she has left to trust and engage in the relief of intercourse.

As Offred continues her illicit encounters with Nick, Katz-Roy argues that Nick in some way is Offred's alter ego, comparing him to Offred's mirror image (122). However, how can Offred have two alter egos? Stillman and Johnson consider in their essay, Moira, the brave, lesbian, and escaped Handmaid, to be Offred's true alter ego. Nick and Moira are completely opposite in their methods of resistance. Moira rebels outwardly and makes her anti-government beliefs known, while Nick, like Offred, prefers to carry out acts of resistance behind closed doors, inwardly, and plays the obedient chauffeur for the entirety of the novel. I agree with Stillman and Johnson and their view that Moira is the obvious and sole alter ego of Offred. Nick can't possibly be Offred's alter ego because they are far too similar. They both resist inwardly and maintain their submissive roles within society and their household. Neither of them is willing to outwardly resist. Moira goes out of her way to go against society and although she doesn't end up resisting until the end, when she is resisting, it is loud, outward, and masculine.

By looking at *The Handmaid's Tale* as a story about the power of alliances and resistance against a harsh government, we can see the similar role partnerships play in the present. Currently, women and men across the nation are rallying against the new Trump administration. These men and women are an emerging alliance. In response to Trump being inaugurated, on Saturday January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017 over 2.6 million Americans took to the streets all across the country to march (Przybyla and Schouten). The marches were headquartered in Washington with the aim that, "participants will unite to end violence and promote rights for women, LGBT people, workers, people of color, people with disabilities, and immigrants," and that, "[The marches] will send a bold message to our new government on their first day in office, and to the world that

women's rights are human rights.” (Swalec). The enormous turnout of Americans all over the country can be seen as the ultimate use of alliances to dissent. The cause caught the media’s attention long enough to make people aware of the issues numerous groups are facing. Though the march was heavily focused on women’s rights, its mission statement claimed that the aim was also to raise awareness to protect other groups’ rights that the public fears will be violated as a result of Trump’s election.

Though the marches themselves were acts of resistance, several other pieces were implemented that played a role in the movement. For instance, besides the signs that were raised and the unified chants, many women at the Washington D.C march wore “pussy hats.” These knit beanies come in pink and have cat ears stitched on each side to resemble a cat and were made in response to the president elect bragging in a previous interview that he has repeatedly groped several women’s genitals (Garfield). This region of a women’s body is often referred to, crudely, as a woman’s “pussy”. The play on words inspired the hats and led women to make and don them for the march. The hats are themselves rebellious because they draw attention to a character flaw in a major government official, in this case the president, making fun of him. The pussy hats combined with signs that read things such as “Nasty Women Make (Her)story” and “Women’s Rights are Human Rights,” along with several celebrity appearances and speeches, made the march an outstanding success. The alliance of those who rallied for the marches demonstrates the importance of partnerships when seeking change through resistance.

The alliance of millions of men and women that came together to support the rights of many is similar to the alliances Offred depends on in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the cases of Offred and the alliance of those who marched, we can see that both were dissatisfied with their government and acted in response to their rights being violated. Like Offred, women in America

are at risk of losing some of their reproductive rights as abortion continues to be a subject of controversy. With the Trump administration defunding health clinics, like Planned Parenthood, that provide abortion services and emergency contraceptives among other services, they are taking away a woman's choice. Although Atwood's tale was only meant to be a warning to readers, there is no doubt that there are staggering similarities between her fabricated dystopian future and the present we are experiencing.

Atwood manufactures a main character that readers can relate to. In times of compulsory reform and seemingly abrupt government decisions, citizens can feel powerless and threatened. Offred can easily be compared to any citizen who has ever had their rights violated and felt like they could only do so much to resist. By comparing Offred's situation to our own, as the reader, we can begin to believe that we are not powerless. We are at our most powerful, it seems, when we form concrete relationships with others who feel the same way. Greater movements can stem from these relationships, turning into mass demonstrations of resistance such as the 2017 Women's March. The mix of fictional and real-life examples of effective alliances to rebel can be seen as inspiring to others. There is still hope, a chance for reform, for those dissatisfied with their government. Through systematic alliances, the possibilities for resistance can be limitless.

## Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. McClelland, 1985.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. "Moving Beyond 'The Blank White Spaces': Atwood's Gilead, Postmodernism and Strategic Resistance." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, pp. 20-42. *MLA Database*. Accessed March 4, 2017.
- Garfield, Leanna. "Thousands of Women Will Wear Pink 'Pussy Hats' the Day after Trump's Inauguration." *Business Insider*, 18 Jan. 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/pussy-hats-womens-march-washington-trump-inauguration-2017-1>. Accessed 29 April 2017.
- Hansot, Elisabeth. "Selves, Survival, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 56-69. *JSTOR*. Accessed March 14, 2017.
- Katz-Roy, Ginette. "Sexual Politics and Textual Strategies in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *History, Politics, Identity: Reading Literature in a Changing World*, edited by Marija Knezevic, Aleksandra Nikčević-Batrićević, and Peter Preston. Cambridge Scholars, 2008, pp. 111-133.
- Przybyla, Heidi M. and Fredreka Schouten. "At 2.6 Million Strong, Women's Marches Crush Expectations." *USA Today*, 21 Jan. 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/01/21/womens-march-aims-start-movement-trump-inauguration/96864158/>. Accessed 29 April 2017.
- Stillman, Peter G. and Anne S. Johnson. "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 70-86. *JSTOR*. Accessed March 12, 2017.
- Swalec, Andrea. "Everything You Need to Know for the Women's March on Washington." *NBC Washington*, 17 Jan. 2017. <http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/Everything-You->



[Need-to-Know-for-the-Womens-March-on-Washington-410966765.html](#). Accessed 29

April 2017.

