

SYMPOSIUM:
GENDER, HEALTH & THE CONSTITUTION

**MORE THAN MERELY “TWO-LEGGED WOMBS”:
LESSONS ON METAPHOR AND BODY POLITICS FROM
ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* (1985)**

*Rachel Conrad Bracken**

[T]he idea that women exist as a kind of natural resource to be exploited in service of political and economic goals, rather than as people in their own right, is an attitude so common that it often goes unmentioned and even unnoticed.
– Amanda Taub

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with a simple premise: that the words we use matter. More specifically, that the metaphorical language we use to describe and legislate the reproductive potential of people who can become pregnant not only reflects deeply entrenched heterosexist socio-cultural “values,” but also enables dehumanizing “health” policy that disregards evidence-based medicine and bodily autonomy alike.¹ In an essay exposing the exploitation of South Korean sex workers published in May 2023, *New York Times* journalist Amanda Taub observes, “the idea that women exist as a kind of natural resource to be exploited in service of political and economic goals, rather than as people in their own right,

*PhD, Assistant Professor of Family and Community Medicine, Northeast Ohio Medical University. Thank you to Tracy Thomas for the invitation to participate in the 2023 Constitutional Law Conference at the University of Akron School of Law; it was an honor to learn alongside the esteemed presenters. Many thanks are due, as well, to Brittany Henry, PhD, whose careful reading and many years of friendship have made me a better scholar.

1. I acknowledge that not only those people who identify as women can and do become pregnant, as well as that not all people who identify as women can or do become pregnant. Because my argument explores the metaphoric conflation of women with the ability to become pregnant, this essay variably utilizes “women” and the more inclusive “people who can become pregnant” as appropriate.

is an attitude so common that it often goes unmentioned and even unnoticed.”² I venture that this attitude goes “unmentioned and even unnoticed” in part because the figurative language we use to describe women and women’s bodies has become so standardized and internalized that the metaphors we invoke in descriptions of reproductive biology are no longer recognizable as figurative language—what we refer to as “dead” metaphors.³ The proverbial “ticking” of one’s “biological clock,” for example, is so commonly referenced in discussions of female fertility that it comes to resemble similarly dead metaphors including variations on “time is money,” which can be spent profligately or saved wisely, and the notion that we must “fight disease,” as though illness prevention and the body’s immune response are equivalent to either battle or war. Thus, metaphors depicting the structure, function, and governability of women’s bodies—particularly when these metaphors are no longer recognizable as metaphor at all—inform political rhetoric and proposed legislation regarding access to reproductive healthcare especially salient since the ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overturned the constitutional right to abortion established fifty years ago in *Roe v. Wade*.

Definitions of metaphor from the fields of rhetoric and narrative theory are manifold and robust, but, in its most basic form, a metaphor is a type of figurative language—akin to allegory, symbolism, and simile—wherein one thing is described as another or, as is true of the specific type of metaphor known as synecdoche, wherein a part comes to stand for the whole.⁴ Metaphors are comprised of a “tenor,” or target, and the “vehicle,” or source, to which the tenor is compared. For example, the cutesy colloquialism “bun in the oven” to describe pregnancy metaphorically depicts the pregnant person (the tenor) with an oven (the vehicle), the fetus (tenor) with a bun (vehicle), and the process of gestation (tenor) as baking (vehicle); notably, neither tenor nor vehicle of the latter metaphor are named directly, but rather implied by “bun” and “oven.” Though fundamentally literary or linguistic devices, metaphors are also “important sites where cultural norms, scientific and biomedical theories, and individual experiences intersect,” scholar of American literature and culture Anita Wohlmann insists.⁵ Even when its tenor and vehicle are

2. Amanda Taub, *A South Korean Horror Story, Long Suppressed*, N.Y. TIMES, May 3, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/world/asia/south-korean-comfort-women-suppressed.html>.

3. ANITA WOHLMANN, METAPHOR IN ILLNESS WRITING: FIGHT AND BATTLE REUSED 12 (2022).

4. See WOHLMANN, *supra* note 3, at 8-14, for a robust definition of metaphor and an overview of theoretical approaches to metaphor analysis.

5. Anita Wohlmann, *Of Termites and Ovaries on Strike: Rethinking Medical Metaphors of the Female Body*, 43(1) SIGNS: J. OF WOMEN IN CULTURE & SOC’Y 127, 127 (2017).

easily identified, a metaphor’s meaning is rarely straightforward. What does it mean to compare a pregnant body to an oven or the process of fetal development to baking? How do such comparisons illustrate biomedical concepts or the individual experience of being pregnant? In the rhetoric of reproductive health, synecdochical metaphors frequently conflate an individual’s reproductive organs—their womb, uterus, etc.—or their reproductive potential—their ability to become pregnant—with the *person* who can become pregnant. Homing in on this singular aspect obscures other dimensions of an individual: that someone can become pregnant becomes the most salient part of their identity, this reproductive potential thus synecdochally representing their entire reason for being.

As a health humanities scholar trained in American literary studies, I specialize in narrative and cultural analyses of medicine and public health in the United States. Accordingly, this paper’s exploration of metaphor and body politics is grounded in the analysis of a fictional text: Margaret Atwood’s canonical—and perpetually relevant—feminist novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which was originally published in 1985, first adapted for film in 1990, and again adapted as a television series by Hulu in 2017. Looking to the ways in which ritualized rape and forced surrogacy are both justified and contested in Atwood’s novel, this paper begins by interrogating the ubiquitous cultural and biomedical metaphors that reduce women and pregnant people to their bodies’ reproductive potential. In the essay’s first section, I draw from scholarship in medical anthropology, medical rhetoric, and literary studies to illuminate how gendered stereotypes pervade biomedical, cultural, and legal representations of reproduction, as well as how the figurative language deployed in these realms reifies the synecdoche uterus *is* woman and, conversely, woman is uterus. Scrutinizing how this figurative language functions in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I argue in the essay’s second section that the novel renders biomedical metaphors of women’s bodies as reproductive machines literal by legally classifying fertile women as “national resources” within a patriarchal capitalist economy. I contend that this dehumanizing abstraction, which equates women’s bodies with a means of (re)production, permits the State first to commodify, then to commandeer and “equitably” distribute fertile women in the name of public health and ecological crisis management in the novel’s the violently patriarchal sociopolitical economy. Attending to the figurative language that enables draconian laws regulating reproduction in Atwood’s dystopia, I hope to encourage critique of the metaphorical thinking that pervades contemporary legal and sociopolitical rhetoric regarding reproductive health, pregnancy, and contraception, as well as to raise

awareness of how, as ecofeminist Vandana Shiva insists, economic and political structures grounded in patriarchal capitalism “create a culture of rape—rape of the Earth, of local self-reliant economies, of women” such that “the rape of the Earth and the rape of women are intimately linked—both metaphorically, in shaping worldviews, and materially, in shaping women’s everyday lives.”⁶ Ultimately, rejecting a “culture of rape” requires reimagining the “unmentioned and even unnoticed” metaphors that reduce people who can become pregnant to exploitable resources.

II. MERELY “TWO-LEGGED WOMBS”: METAPHOR AND REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

The Handmaid’s Tale has been a staple in women’s literature, dystopian literature, and women’s and gender studies courses for decades. Recently, Hulu’s popular adaption—which began airing in April 2017, amid a general increase in the consumption of dystopian fiction following the 2016 presidential election—introduced *The Handmaid’s Tale* to an even wider audience. In the novel’s speculative near-future, environmental pollution has precipitated a widespread fertility crisis: birthrates have plummeted “past the zero line of replacement, and down and down” while the rates of miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death have skyrocketed.⁷ The evangelical, extremist Sons of Jacob take this simultaneously environmental and public health crisis as justification for their violent overthrow of the United States government and the creation of a totalitarian religious regime: Gilead. At the center of their new world order is the ritualized rape and forced surrogacy of fertile women—handmaids—assigned to wealthy and powerful politicians. Here, violent patriarchy is couched as benevolent paternalism and a return to “traditional” gender roles and family values.

Narrated by the notoriously unreliable Offred (named, like all handmaids, for the Commander—in this case, Fred Waterford—to whom she has been assigned), the novel follows her posting in Commander Waterford’s home.⁸ Set in a barely recognizable Cambridge, Massachusetts and shifting between Offred’s present-day life in the

6. MARIA MIES & VANDANA SHIVA, *ECOFEMINISM* xvi (2d ed. 2014).

7. MARGARET ATWOOD, *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* 112-13 (New York: Anchor Books, 1998). Subsequent references to the novel will be provided parenthetically by page number.

8. Though Offred herself never tells us her Commander’s full name, the fictional Professor James Darcy Pieixoto details the evidence supporting his conclusions that the Fred to whom Offred refers is Waterford rather than Judd in his keynote address, delivered at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, in the novel’s final section: “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (306-07). The recent Hulu adaptation likewise identifies the narrator’s “hosts” as Fred and Serena Waterford.

Waterford’s household, her training in the Rachel and Leah Re-Education (or RED) Center, and the time before the “revolution,” it chronicles the Sons of Jacob’s rise to power and the brutal dystopia they have built. Women have been stripped of their right to own property and to either read or write; those married to wealthy and powerful men—the Wives, dressed in blue—oversee the Marthas who, dressed in green, cook and clean for the Commanders’ families. Handmaids, dressed in red, have a singular task: to bear Gilead’s children. An army of Aunts wielding cattle prods are responsible for transforming “lazy women” and “sluts” into docile handmaids while those deemed “Unwomen”—LGBTQIA+ “gender traitors,” rebels, elderly, and infertile women—either farm or clean up toxic waste in the “Colonies.” Lastly, those not lucky enough to be married to wealthy and powerful commanders—the “Econo-wives”—fulfill the “traditional” roles of women as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. As she navigates this violent and surreal landscape, Offred befriends her shopping partner, who is a member of the insurgent Mayday Underground, plays illicit games of Scrabble with Commander Waterford, and falls in love with his driver, Nick, eventually becoming pregnant with Nick’s child. The novel ends ambiguously with either Offred’s execution or escape from Gilead, but the fictional “Historical Notes” that serve as an epilogue reassure readers that the violent regime does eventually fall.

In truth, not much actually happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Rather, as readers, we accompany Offred in her isolated imprisonment and frequent flashbacks. We observe Offred’s world and play along with the word games she invents to stay sharp, even as women in Gilead are forbidden from reading and writing. With her, we struggle to comprehend how the world we know could so rapidly devolve into fundamentalist authoritarianism, searching for the roots of dystopia in our own present. With her, we learn what it feels like to become a thing—a “container,” (97) a “two-legged womb, that’s all; sacred vessel, ambulatory chalice” (136), “merely a usable body” (163). And yet what is most striking about these descriptions of women’s bodies may be their familiarity. Indeed, the dehumanizing objectification of fertile women in Atwood’s Gilead both amplifies and mirrors the ways in which women’s bodies—and their reproductive biology, specifically—have been and continue to be represented both socioculturally and biomedically in Western culture. Medical anthropologist Emily Martin’s 1991 article *The Egg and the Sperm*, published in the feminist journal *Signs*, contends that accounts of reproductive anatomy provided in biomedical textbooks rely on metaphors steeped in cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Oogenesis, the production of ova, is described as a wasteful process,

menstruation as failure, and fertilization as the conquest or rescue of a passive ovum—misleading representations of biological processes that naturalize gender stereotypes and, by endowing gametes with agency, may elevate the rights of the zygote above those of the pregnant person, Martin warns.⁹

Likewise, *The Woman in the Body*, Martin's groundbreaking "cultural analysis of reproduction," unearths the pervasive cultural stereotypes that permeate medical and bioscientific accounts of female reproductive biology. Published in 1987, just one year after *The Handmaid's Tale* was released in the U.S., Martin's book explores how "metaphors of production inform medical descriptions of female bodies," as well as how these metaphors—which "have tied 'women' to their bodies"—reveal "the ways that the bodies of women and men are inevitably entangled in the operations of power."¹⁰ Martin's analysis of menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, and child birth draws attention to machine models of women's bodies—bodies governed by "a hierarchical system of centralized control organized for the purpose of efficient production and speed" because they are at risk of "breakdown, decay, failure, or inefficiency."¹¹ And when we understand women's bodies as machines to be managed or optimized according to a capitalist model of industrial production, Martin explains, women come to perceive their bodies as something apart from, even in opposition to, their selves.

This fragmentation and alienation are echoed in Offred's perception of herself as "merely a usable body" in Gilead, wherein Martin's metaphors are made literal (163).¹² "We are containers," the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* explains, describing the status of fertile women in the novel's dystopian society (96). Not merely a comparison between the metaphor's target, or that which is described, and its source, or what is used to describe the target of the metaphor, the metaphor does more than "proclaim a similarity or sameness" between "women" and "containers." That is, the metaphor goes beyond straight comparison—we are *like* containers, for example—to "*establish*, or invite us to establish, that resemblance" and, in so doing, allow us to "perceive an experience or idea *more* distinctly, with heightened insight and greater access to a sensory or

9. Emily Martin, *The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles*, 16(3) SIGNS: J. OF WOMEN IN CULTURE & SOC'Y 485, 500-01 (1991).

10. EMILY MARTIN, *THE WOMAN IN THE BODY: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF REPRODUCTION* xxiv, xxvii-xxviii (3d ed. 2001).

11. MARTIN, *supra* note 10, at 66.

12. *Id.* at 71.

perceived truthfulness,” Wohlmann explains.¹³ Thus, fertile women in Gilead are not only *like* containers because their bodies are capable of carrying a fetus, but to proclaim that they *are* containers further implies a dehumanizing lack of sentience, a singularity of purpose limited to one’s ability to become pregnant and give birth. Conversely, an empty container is defined by its lack: “just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven—to be crude—minus the bun,” Offred riffs (163). Accordingly, unless married to a powerful Commander, infertile women are deemed “Unwomen” and forced into dangerous, degrading manual labor in Gilead.

Reflecting on the tattoo that marks her as a fertile woman and, thus, state property, Offred remarks, “I am a national resource” (65). Is this a metaphor? Is she literally a national or natural resource—“things such as minerals, forests, coal, etc.” that “can be used by people” and “have economic value to a country,” per the Cambridge dictionary¹⁴—or is this a metaphor meant to illuminate and accentuate the dehumanizing treatment of those who can become pregnant in the fictional nation of Gilead? Michel Foucault’s theorization of biopolitics considers the ways by which the population was conceptualized as a national resource to be stewarded—and perhaps exploited—by the State, by which logic Offred and her fellow handmaids are quite literally national resources.¹⁵ Yet Taub’s observation that “the idea that women exist as a kind of natural resource to be exploited in service of political and economic goals, rather than as people in their own right, is an attitude so common that it often goes unmentioned and even unnoticed,” suggests the perception of women as exploitable resources is a dead metaphor, one so common it is no longer recognized as metaphor at all. Repeatedly describing Gilead’s women as comparable to national resources—handmaids valued for their reproductive potential, Marthas and “Unwomen” forced into servitude, Econo-wives whose domestic labor is invisible, though essential—naturalizes the analogy, thereby transforming women into things to be used in service to sociopolitical and economic ends. So it is that metaphor becomes law, that people who can become pregnant are stripped of their agency and autonomy and legal rights, that objectifying language

13. WOHLMANN, *supra* note 3, at 12-14 (All emphases in original.).

14. “Natural Resources,” CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/natural-resources>.

15. Biopolitics, as Michel Foucault defines it in the 1975–1976 lectures at the Collège de France “Society Must Be Defended,” is a “new technology of power” whereby “the biological came under State control.” *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*, at 240-42 (Mauro Bertani & Alessandro Fontana, eds., David Macey, trans. (2003)).

transforms women into objects. Extrapolating this nightmare marketplace further in the Hulu adaptation, Commander Waterford negotiates with an ambassador from Mexico, bartering handmaids for oranges in a heavy-handed illustration of Gileadean biopolitics. Handmaids are neither viewed nor treated as citizens with legal rights, but instead as “two-legged wombs” obliged to gestate future citizens on behalf of the State and, in the process, to be divvied up among rich and powerful men (163).

It is unsurprising, then, that critical responses to Atwood’s novel and the recent television adaption have largely focused on religion, politics, and feminist issues, and that most scholars engage with *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a political dystopia, calling attention to the myriad, violent ways in which women’s bodies function throughout as “site[s] on which political power is exercised.”¹⁶ Indeed, since the release of the Hulu series, the handmaids’ red habit has emerged as a potent symbol of women’s sexual and political oppression and been adopted as arresting protest attire. Amid calls to “Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again,” costumed women have protested anti-abortion bills in Texas, Ohio, and Missouri; joined the Women’s March in January 2018; followed former Vice President Mike Pence around Republican fundraisers in the Northeast; stood in judgment of Justice Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearings; and protested outside Justice Amy Coney Barret’s home following the draft opinion spelling the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.¹⁷ And yet, what happens when we understand the authoritarian government of Atwood’s Gilead as one motivated not solely by conservative political or religious values, but rather by the public health concerns that emerge in a polluted, and increasingly unlivable, world? What might it mean to take literally Offred’s assertion that she and her fellow handmaids are “national resources”—to understand the governmental management of fertile women, of handmaids, as public health policy in a population crisis?

16. Madeleine Davies, *Margaret Atwood’s Female Bodies*, in *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARGARET ATWOOD* 58 (Coral Ann Howells, ed. 2006). Without offering an extended analysis of the novel, Ellen Cronan Rose does position *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an ecofeminist text, thereby calling attention to the link between forced surrogacy and public health concerns that I explore herein: “A reproductive crisis is brought about by an environmental crisis (toxicity in the environment has rendered most women—and probably men, too—sterile). The Gileadean’s ‘solution’ to this crisis is to attack not environmental pollution but women, exalting and expropriating the reproductive capabilities of some women for the benefit of the state.” *The Good Mother: From Gaia to Gilead*, 12.1 *FRONTIERS: J. OF WOMEN STUDIES* 77, 87 (1991).

17. Laura Bradley, *Under Their Eye: The Rise of Handmaid’s Tale-Inspired Protestors*, *VANITY FAIR*, Oct. 9, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/photos/2018/10/handmaids-tale-protests-kavanaugh-healthcare-womens-march>; Kui Mwai, *Protesters Dressed as “The Handmaid’s Tale” Characters Outside Justice Amy Coney Barret’s House*, *YAHOO NEWS*, May 12, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/protesters-dressed-handmaids-tale-characters-211309668.html>.

Drawing on ecofeminist theory to contextualize the consequences of metaphorically perceiving people who can become pregnant as “two-legged wombs,” I explore in the following section how the violent regulation of reproductive potential is rationalized as a population health response to environmental crisis in Atwood’s novel—a terrifying suspension of individual rights for the common good.

III. “BETTER FOR SOME”: POPULATION DECLINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

While I do not contest that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a thought-provoking political dystopia, I wish to contend that attending to the metaphorization of women as “containers,” “two-legged wombs,” and, subsequently, as exploitable “national resources” reveals the ways in which Atwood’s novel is, at its core, an ecological dystopia with profound implications for public health. Without a doubt, the authoritarian government established by the Sons of Jacob is socio-politically toxic— toxic masculinity taken to the extreme—but the physical environment of Gilead is equally toxic. Scholars have not adequately explored the environmental and ecofeminist dimensions of Atwood’s political dystopia, however. It is Atwood’s later *MaddAddam* trilogy that earns the title “ecological dystopia” and that scholars most often cite when discussing environmentalism in Atwood’s oeuvre.¹⁸ Coral Ann Howells, for example, argues that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, the first novel in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, “belong to distinct dystopian traditions”; *The Handmaid’s Tale* imagines “the possible consequences of neo-conservative religious and political trends” while *Oryx and Crake* considers the impact of “worldwide climate change,” Howells

18. Davies, *supra* note 16, argues that “Atwood’s female bodies are inevitably coded bodies that tell the story of the subjects’ experience within a political economy that seeks to consume them, convert them into consumers in turn, shrink them, neutralize them, silence them, and contain them physically or metaphorically” (60); yet, in analyzing how “wider power structures are written onto female flesh” (58), she does not consider the impact of environmental or public health concerns explicitly. Likewise, Pilar Somacarrera’s Foucauldian reading of power in *The Handmaid’s Tale* notes the privileged position of doctors and reproduction but does not consider the State’s biopolitical management of population health as that which underlies the entire Gileadean regime. *Power Politics: Power and Identity*, THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARGARET ATWOOD 43, 53-54 (Coral Ann Howells, ed. 2006). ShaKui Mwnnon Hengen’s essay “Margaret Atwood and Environmentalism” makes no mention of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, focusing instead on Atwood’s non-fiction prose (a lecture later published as *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* in 1991) and two early collections of poetry (*Procedures for Underground*, 1970, and *Interlunar*, 1984), in addition to the novels *Surfacing* (1972), *Life Before Man* (1979), and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARGARET ATWOOD 72 (Coral Ann Howells, ed. 2006).

propounds.¹⁹ But ecological and political dystopia are inextricable, in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in our own world, as Atwood herself maintains in a May 2018 interview. “Women will be directly and adversely affected by climate change,” Atwood insists, especially as climate change gives rise to social unrest, brutal repression, and totalitarianism.²⁰ Atwood's remarks illustrate the theoretical and activist contours of ecofeminism, which draws connections across feminist and environmental social movement to amplify “the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature.”²¹ Thus, it is only once we expand the frame to see Gilead's political dystopia as part of the larger ecological dystopia and *The Handmaid's Tale* as an ecofeminist novel that the full implications of the metaphorization of women's reproductive capacity become legible.

Environmental destruction and political unrest intersect in public health in *The Handmaid's Tale*: as pollution begets infertility, a repressive totalitarian regime rises to power. “There was no one cause” of the infertility crisis, Aunt Lydia teaches a room full of fertile women forcibly conscripted to serve as handmaids; still, she reserves a certain scorn for the wicked, “lazy women” who chose not to have children (113). Certainly, the wide availability of birth control and access to legal abortion likely contributed to fewer births, and Offred likewise concedes that “some [women] did it themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals” (112). But she refuses to place the onus of infertility solely on women's reproductive decisions, countering Aunt Lydia's “lazy women” narrative with an account of environmental pollution's impact on involuntary infertility:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of

19. Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake*, in *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARGARET ATWOOD* 161, 163 (Coral Ann Howells, ed. 2006). To be fair, Howells describes the ecological disaster in *Oryx and Crake* as an outgrowth of “the pollution and environmental destruction which threatened one region of North America in [*The Handmaid's Tale*]” (161). She approaches *Oryx and Crake* as a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (161 and 170), insisting that although the hypothetical situations each explores are “very different,” they are “two sides of the same fictional coin” (162).

20. Fiona Harvey, *Margaret Atwood: Women Will Bear Brunt of Dystopian Climate Future*, *THE GUARDIAN*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/31/margaret-atwood-women-will-bear-brunt-of-dystopian-climate-future>.

21. MIES & SHIVA, *supra* note 6, at 14.

eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old-fashioned watch. . . . A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. (112)

Here, Offred yokes her reproductive health to the health of the environment, attributing widespread infertility to forces beyond her own, or any single individual's ability to prevent. Blame and consequence are shared across a society that pops pills, sprays pesticides, and inadvertently builds nuclear power plants along a fault line. Now, the chances that a woman will give birth to an “Unbaby”—an infant with no chance of survival—are “one in four,” Offred reports (112). Comparing her body to “an oily beach,” Offred accentuates the ways in which her body both resembles and is inextricable from the natural environment. Her body, and its reproductive potential, is like a natural resource, something to be strictly regulated and profited upon by a national government, but also vulnerable to the same pollutants.

Women disproportionately bear the burden of this health crisis, both as cause and solution for population decline and ecological cataclysm. “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially,” Offred explains. “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law” (61). Because Offred has, in her previous life and marriage, carried a healthy infant to term, she is “too important, too scarce” to maintain control of her own fertility (65). Now, she is “a national resource” (65). Put another way, the extreme conditions of a fertility crisis justify the legal redefinition of people who can become pregnant as “national resource[s]” to be violently controlled and exploited. Here, Shiva's previously mentioned conflation of environmental exploitation—“the rape of the Earth”—with sexual assault—the “rape of women”—is all too vividly illustrated. Although Offred is a fictional character, the oppressive regime she is trapped within is more truth than fiction, mirroring the condition of “women all over the world” who, “since the beginning of patriarchy, were also treated like ‘nature,’ devoid of rationality,” and “like nature[,] could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man,” as ecofeminist scholar and activist Maria Mies contends.²² Mies argues that “the tools” for this exploitation “are science, technology and violence,” but I would add the rhetorical

22. MIES & SHIVA, *supra* note 6, at xxiii.

power of metaphor to the list as a crucial tool of biopolitics.²³ The simultaneous dehumanization and disenfranchisement we see in the fictional world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as our own, is possible because the figurative language used to describe women's reproductive biology, specifically, synecdochally reduces them to their reproductive organs: merely "two-legged wombs" or "containers" to be filled.

Because the infertility crisis is part and parcel of the larger, environmental crisis in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is a public health concern, and thus falls under the purview of biopolitical management. In Atwood's Gilead, infertility is the product of environmental pollution. As a collective threat, one shared among all members of the community, it demands a collective solution: those who can bear children are expected to do so for those who cannot. In Gilead, fertile women are forced to surrender their bodily autonomy for the "good" of the population at large. Thus, Gilead's authoritarian response to a "plague" of infertility compels us to reckon with the State's (seemingly unlimited) power to manage the body politic in times of crisis. Of course, "Better never means better for everyone," Offred's Commander explains, "It always means worse, for some" (211). But how far ought a government go to protect the health of the population? When does the greater good justify an infringement upon—or total elimination of—an individual's right to bodily autonomy? Do an individual's concerns ever outweigh the impositions of population-level policy initiatives? This tension between collective "benefit" and individual rights underlies Gilead's—indeed, every nation's—social order.²⁴ Yet those who craft health law and policy may overlook or dismiss the individualized, day-to-day repercussions of the ostensibly "common" good. "Women can't add," Offred recalls her commander joking; "When I asked him what he meant, he said, For them, one and one and one and one doesn't make four. What do they make? I said, expecting five or three. Just one and one and one and one, he said" (186). This sexist,

23. *Id.*

24. These questions have troubled public health policy writers since the profession arose in the nineteenth century and continue to inform contemporary debates over pediatric vaccination; the fluorination of public water supplies; "sin" taxes on alcohol, cigarettes, or soda; and the regulation of consumer goods. Indeed, the governmental regulation of personal affairs gives rise to one of the central conflicts running through American public health history, historian John Duffy claims: "the clash between individual liberty and the public welfare." *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health* 3 (1992). "Unfortunately," Duffy continues, "sanitary and health regulations inevitably infringe on individual rights, a situation compounded by the general American distrust of all laws and regulations. . . . The zealous guarding of individual rights creates major problems for health officials in a democracy," he concludes. For more on the conflict between public health and individual autonomy, see Deborah Lupton, *The Imperative of Health: Public Health and the Regulated Body* (1995).

though seemingly innocuous, joke epitomizes his political philosophy. To the Commander, the individual is subsumed by the collective, no longer independent or autonomous. Yet the women his joke depicts, like Offred, resist this logic. The Commander interprets their resistance as ignorance, but for Offred, who refuses to forget her former name and longs “to be valued, . . . to be more than valuable,” it is rebellion (97).

Attending to the metaphors that enable the dehumanization and enslavement of fertile women in Atwood’s novel unearths, to borrow from E. Ann Kaplan, “a background story that is actually the real meaning of [*The Handmaid’s Tale*],” since Offred’s story is part of a larger story about infertility and environmental pollution, Kaplan explains.²⁵ Yet where Kaplan contends that an environmental crisis sets the stage for the “dystopian political thriller” that plays out through Offred’s enslavement and eventual escape, it is crucial that we recognize the *biopolitical* implications of infertility in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. That the environmental crisis ultimately responsible for plummeting birthrates and an uptick in miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant mortality is perceived as a public health crisis sets the stage not only for a fundamentalist Christian “revolution,” but also for the State’s draconian management of fertile women’s bodies, and the transformation of people who can become pregnant into “national resources” to be exploited.

III. CONCLUSION: OLD METAPHORS, NEW MEANINGS

As far-fetched as it may have once seemed, the brutal dystopia imagined in Atwood’s now classic novel is infamously *nonfictional* in the sense that the laws and rituals central to its fundamentalist religious government are all, Atwood attests, based on real world examples of violence against women meticulously catalogued in the author’s archives.²⁶ Likewise, in the brief “Note to the Reader” appended to the novel’s text, Atwood explains that “there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* except the time and place. All of the things I have written about have . . . been done before, more than once” (316). Indeed, the dehumanizing objectification of fertile women in Atwood’s Gilead both amplifies and mirrors the ways in which women’s

25. E. ANN KAPLAN, CLIMATE TRAUMA: FORESEEING THE FUTURE IN DYSTOPIAN FILM AND FICTION 68 (2016).

26. Further, Atwood discusses the events that informed the novel in a 2019 interview. Interview, *Margaret Atwood on the Real-life Events that Inspired The Handmaid’s Tale and The Testaments*, Penguin Random House UK, Sept. 9, 2019, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/09/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-testaments-real-life-inspiration>.

bodies—and their reproductive biology, specifically—have been and continue to be represented biomedically, socioculturally, and legally in the U.S. Stripping women of their legal rights and bodily autonomy such that forced surrogacy becomes the public health response to a fertility crisis is imaginable in Atwood’s Gilead only because it intensifies how, as Katherine de Gama contends, “medicine has long been used to subject women to a centralized, panoptic model of containment reducing them to the status of objects of reproduction.”²⁷ Thus, by attending to the metaphors used to describe fertile women’s bodies in the novel and foregrounding the intersection of environmental concerns, toxicity, biopolitics, and public health at the center of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this essay reorients the text toward an audience of health policy makers, health humanities scholars, and reproductive justice advocates.

In our present-day reality, as in Atwood’s Gilead, the tendency to regulate access to reproductive health care, including contraceptives and abortion care, as somehow decoupled from the actual people who can become pregnant relies on the reductive metaphorization of women and people who can become pregnant as solely their reproductive capacity—as, in Offred’s words, a “two-legged womb, that’s all” (136). Such laws need not take account of the complex lives of women beyond their reproductive potential because women are synecdochally conflated with their reproductive organs: uterus *is* woman, and, conversely, woman is uterus. Consider, as an example, the so-called “heartbeat bills” enacted at the state level to prohibit abortion once fetal cardiac activity is detectable. These laws include exceptions to preserve the life and, in some cases, the “health,” of a pregnant person, but these exceptions are so vaguely and narrowly defined that pregnant people have endured unnecessary, deadly health complications—such as deep vein thrombosis, eclampsia, embolism, and sepsis, in the case of twenty women suing the state of Texas in late 2023²⁸—before receiving life-saving healthcare.²⁹ Such “exceptions” presuppose that the default obligation of people who can become pregnant is to carry all pregnancies to term—an unethical, if not unconstitutional, mandate reducing them to “containers” for an “unborn

27. Katherine de Gama, *A Brave New World? Rights Discourse and the Politics of Reproductive Autonomy*, 20.1 J. LAW & SOCIETY 114 (Spring 1993).

28. Selena Simmons-Duffin, *20 Women are Now Suing Texas, Saying State Abortion Laws Endangered Them*, NPR, Nov. 15, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/11/15/1213188342/20-women-sue-texas-over-abortion-laws>.

29. Laurie Sobel, Mabel Felix & Alina Salganicoff, *Who Decides When a Patient Qualifies for an Abortion Ban Exception? Doctors vs. the Courts*, KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, Dec. 14, 2023, <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/who-decides-when-patient-qualifies-for-abortion-ban-exception/>.

child” (per the Texas state law).³⁰ How pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing may impact a person who can become pregnant beyond their body’s capacity to gestate, such as their ability to engage in paid labor, care for family members, or even complete daily household tasks without pain, are not accounted for in state-level abortion bans or their exceptions, although pregnancy and parenthood are transformative experiences that affect every dimension of an individual’s life, from their sense of self to family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, employment, economics, and bodily health.

What I hope this essay has demonstrated is that we must not become inured to the use of figurative language in biomedical science or health policy, not let metaphors that strip people who can become pregnant of their agency and their humanity to sleep or die. Dead metaphors entrench sociocultural stereotypes that, especially when pertaining to biological function, “make them seem so natural as to be beyond alternation,” Martin warns.³¹ When metaphors that reduce pregnant people to “containers” and “two-legged wombs” become so common we no longer recognize them as metaphors at all, dehumanization, violence, and exploitation are sure to follow. And yet, figurative language, and metaphors in particular, are essential for thought and communication; “not only is there no way we *cannot* use metaphors,” Anita Wohlmann explains, “it is through metaphors that we understand the world.”³² But sleeping metaphors can be awoken, Martin insists, and even dead metaphors can be reanimated, Wohlmann demonstrates.³³ Reductive metaphors can and do traffic in sexist and dehumanizing stereotypes, but the ways in which metaphors produce meaning are rarely simple or singular; rather, “a metaphor can also be a site of agency and provide new perspectives, undermine power hierarchies, and reimagine a situation or condition,” Wohlmann maintains.³⁴

Throughout the novel, Offred’s perception of her body and its reproductive potential signals both an internalization of and resistance to reductive synecdoche equating women with wombs. Though fully aware of how the Aunts and Wives and Commanders value her—“a thing is valued,” Aunt Lydia opines in the re-education center, “only if it is rare

30. Casey Michelle Haining, Louise Anne Keogh & Julian Savulescu, *The Unethical Texas Heartbeat Law*, 42.5 *PRENATAL DIAGNOSTICS* 535 (May 2022).

31. Martin, *The Egg and the Sperm*, *supra* note 9, at 500.

32. WOHLMANN, *supra* note 3, at 10.

33. Martin, *The Egg and the Sperm*, *supra* note 9, at 501; Wohlmann, *Of Termites and Ovaries on Strike*, *supra* note 5; WOHLMANN, *supra* note 3.

34. Wohlmann, *Of Termites and Ovaries on Strike*, *supra* note 5, at 130.

and hard to get. . . . Think of yourselves as pearls” (114)—Offred refuses to accept that it is only “the inside of [women’s] bodies that are important” (96). Aunt Lydia compares Gilead’s handmaids to pearls because fertile women are “rare,” beautiful treasures in a violent, polluted world. To Offred, however, “pearls are congealed oyster spit” (114). Recalling the process whereby pearls are formed, Offred reimagines Aunt Lydia’s metaphor. While rare and delicately beautiful, pearls are the oyster’s natural defense mechanism. Coating an irritant or parasite in secretions of aragonite and conchiolin, oysters protect themselves from harm. Likewise, Offred and her fellow handmaids draw on deep reserves of strength and resilience to resist Gilead’s governing ideology. Far from the demure gem Aunt Lydia intends, thinking of herself as a pearl allows Offred to defy authoritarianism and imagine herself as more than a “container” or “two-legged womb,” mobilizing the metaphor as, per Wohlmann, a “site of agency.” Like a pearl, Offred is both tenacious and resourceful when threatened.

Narrative, such as Offred’s tale, serves as a powerful counterbalance to both the reductive metaphorization of women’s bodies and the biopolitical accounting of public health it enables by reminding us that people—the population—are not merely natural resources to be managed by the State, and people who can become pregnant are not merely “containers” designed to carry fetuses and nothing more. Stories give voice to the people upon whom law and policy are enacted, forcing us to recognize their individuality. They allow for fresh manipulation of stale metaphors. Unpacking the figurative language that underpins the social and political exploitation of women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* opens consideration of the novel’s engagement with environmental catastrophe and public health. This shifts the focus of a claustrophobically insular novel and, in doing so, reminds us that “public” health is really quite the opposite; it is both domestic and individual. As such, the ramifications of health law and public health initiatives are intimately felt in the homes and bodies of those who together comprise a population collectively at risk and responsible for maintaining the public’s health. And, as Nancy Tomes’ work on nineteenth-century sanitary reform and domestic hygiene demonstrates, this “private side of public health” has often been women’s domain.³⁵ Atwood’s Gilead takes women’s—often unacknowledged—role in maintaining the public’s health to a ghastly extreme: not only are women expected to carry out a public health agenda through the strict

35. Nancy Tomes, *The Private Side of Public Health: Sanitary Science, Domestic Hygiene, and Germ Theory, 1870–1900*, 64.4 BULLETIN OF HISTORY OF MEDICINE 509 (Winter 1990).

management of their bodies, homes, and families, they are fully transformed into commodifiable national resources. Thus, just as the personal is political, so too are the politics of health law and public health policy decidedly personal.