HISTORICAL REALITY THROUGH DYSTOPIAN LENSES: MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL*.

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University of Leiden
Eugenia Crosetti
S2690896
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Supervisor: Dr. J. C. Kardux
Second reader: Dr. S.A. Polak

Universiteit Leiden

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Introduction

"From our earliest days, as soon as we can crawl around on the floor, we are inscribing maps of our surroundings onto the neural pathways in our brains and – reciprocally – inscribing our own tracks, markings, and namings and claimings onto the landscape itself. […] With every map there's an edge – a border between the known and the unknown" (Atwood, 67). Dystopias – from Greek *dys* and *topos*, "bad place" – are stories about imaginary and unmapped places which are worse than our own reality. While other literary genres and traditions tend to mirror society by means of a mimetic mode of representation, dystopian narratives hyper-exemplify social problems and fears, recreating the empirical world as an imaginative universe which needs new maps in order to be navigated. Because dystopias are alternative worlds and non-mimetic depictions of reality, there is often a tendency to devalue them on the assumption that fantasy in literature functions only as entertainment. This disparaging view of dystopian literature is also a consequence of the association of dystopian fiction with science fiction – the umbrella genre under which utopia, dystopia, speculative fiction and fabulation are often lumped together (Mohr, 6) – which is traditionally considered as a trivial and escapist literary genre (Moylan, 6). However, the feeling of anxiety and unrest one experiences after reading compelling dystopian fiction suggests that the social elsewhere in which the dystopian story takes place is never cognitively far enough not to worry, disturb or warn us.

Therefore, we need new "cognitive maps" (Moylan, xi) to understand the cautionary and critical character of the genre. Through a totalizing mode of interrogation in which past, present and future conflate, dystopian narratives engage with what Moylan calls a "dialectical negotiation of historical tensions" (Moylan, 25). In fact, by inviting the reader to draw unexpected associations between past, present and future, dystopian fiction achieves a didactic aim: it leads to the creation of new cognitive maps for decoding not only contemporary societies, but also past and possible ones. Each dystopia must be understood through renewed connections, oppositions and relations which might guide to productive re-visioning of time, space and social relations (Moylan, 8). In fact, if it is true that dystopias are intimately futuristic, one must not assume from this that they do not involve

critical analysis and critique of the past, besides pointing out its ongoing legacy (Varsam, 209). In particular, as Maria Varsam points out, authors of dystopian fiction draw from certain moments from history which can be conceptualized as "concrete dystopias." The term designates events, institutions and systems that embody and realize organized forces of violence and oppression (Varsam, 209). By drawing the continuum that links fictional and concrete dystopias, we can understand that history informs dystopias in the same way that a dystopian imagery informs and frames historical reality (Varsam, 208) any time that coercive power, state violence, psycho-physical alienation and systematic destruction of identity can be found in society.

In my thesis, I argue that a dystopian continuum can be drawn between Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*. By doing so, a dystopian approach to the concrete dystopia of the US slavery system will lead to unexpected understandings of history and productive associations between fiction and reality. I will analyse how Atwood's dystopian novel can illuminate the gendered character of enslaved women's sexual and reproductive oppression, which is a pivotal theme in Jacobs's narrative as well. In fact, not only do the two texts overlap in terms of narrative and formal strategies despite their diversity, but they also both offer an indictment of and warning against women's gendered oppression irrespective of the context in which it materializes.

In Chapter 1, after delineating the parallel development of dystopian fiction and women's rights movements, I will explain why the dystopian genre is particularly effective to address feminist concerns such as women's sexual and reproductive right of self-determination and the role that sexual violence plays in shaping women's notions of subjecthood, womanhood and motherhood. In Chapter 2, I will analyse Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* outlining the patterns of hegemonic oppression and counter-hegemonic resistance that characterise the protagonist's dystopian experience. my analysis will indicate that women's subjugation in the novel's dystopian society is achieved through both psychophysical and ideological oppression by assigning women to the social mandate of reproduction. Thus, women's systemic sexual and reproductive over-determination and exploitation

will be the conceptual focus which will allow to draw a dystopian continuum with Jacobs's *Incidents*. In Chapter 3, Jacobs's narrative will be analysed through the dystopian approach and framework provided by Atwood's text. I will point out that *Incidents* is characterised by narrative devices and themes analogous to those in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By reading Jacobs from a dystopian perspective, I argue that identification with and empathy for the protagonist allow the reader to experience the concrete dystopia of female slavery in innovative ways. By doing so, the knowledge of historical reality is nuanced and enriched through a comparison with dystopian strategies of oppression and resistance, and the female experience of the US slavery system is revitalized and liberated from its pastness.

Chapter 1:

Dystopian Fiction and Feminism: A Twentieth-Century Trajectory

A brief overview of the rise and development of dystopian fiction will be useful to fully grasp the critical and analytical potential of the genre and to foreground its feminist implications. This "fictive underside of utopian imagination," as Moylan defines dystopian fiction (Moylan, xi), emerged at the beginning of the 1900s in the form of narratives that expressed fear of the drive to innovation that informed modernity (Booker, 5) and concerns about technology and its mechanization and standardization of human life. Successively, the terrible realities of "exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life" (Moylan, xi) created the "terrible place" (the *dys-topos*) that provided the historical and theoretical site of interrogation for the dystopian genre.

By emphasizing that the twentieth century was particularly replete with dystopian content, I do not mean to suggest that the dystopian imagination did not extrapolate from previous historical events or societies. However, it is apparent that the unprecedented scale of trauma and violence experienced in the twentieth century prompted re-presentations of reality that could portray oppression and state violence in a totalizing and defamiliarizing way, to the point of assuming the form of a thought-provoking exercise in world-building. Dystopias, therefore, originated from societies heavily traumatized by history, in which people were, on the one hand, confident that what was once considered unlikely or impossible might actually take place, and on the other hand collectively disillusioned with social dreaming and hopes for better futures, progress and social improvement. The twentieth century ruthlessly showed that configurations of social dreams might result in concrete social nightmares for those individuals who are excluded or exploited in societies that present themselves as ideal.

Moreover, the rising popularity of dystopian fiction also found conceptual underpinnings in the works of the "masters of suspicion," as Paul Ricœur labelled Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and

Friedrich Nietzsche. The unveiling of hidden mechanisms between social actors carried out through historical materialism, psychoanalysis and genealogy, respectively, contributed to the development of a dystopian sensibility preoccupied with displaying unseen, misunderstood or disguised social hierarchies and dynamics. This kind of subversive hermeneutics of suspicion fostered sceptical, anxious dystopian narratives that dismiss any univocal and authoritarian truth (Booker 9). It will be useful to briefly highlight some phases in the development of dystopian fiction in order to understand the genre's thematic shifts according to changing political and social contexts. This will elucidate how and why dystopian narratives can be particularly relevant to feminist understandings of biopower and (sexual) social control and overdetermination of women's bodies.

1.1 Defining the male dystopian canon and the feminist dystopian shift of the 1960s and 1970s

Novels like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) are generally seen as the defining novels of the dystopian genre and establishing the canonical features of classic dystopias (Booker 20; Baccolini and Moylan, 1). Zamyatin and Orwell's totalitarian dystopias, informed by post-revolutionary Soviet Russia and the Stalinist and Fascist regimes of the first half of the twentieth century respectively, imagined stagnant future societies characterised by totalizing state oppression, loss of individual identity, constant systemic surveillance, dehumanizing and mechanizing deployment of advanced technology and collective interpersonal and intrapersonal alienation from past, present and future. Though also including these themes, Huxley's bourgeois dystopia slightly differed from *1984* and *We* in its focus on English runaway capitalism and the anticipation of some trends of Western consumer societies. According to Keith Booker, "the issues explored by these three texts can be grouped roughly under the six rubrics of science and technology, religion, sexuality, literature and culture, language, and history" (Booker, 21). Since classics are works enticing imitation, one understands why later dystopian narratives will revolve around these core topics to varying extent.

For my purposes it is not necessary to go into the common cultural and social concerns that resonate in the three novels, or point out the formal and structural analogies between the texts. However, it is important to underline that the protagonists of the three narratives are male subjects to understand that dystopias were canonically framed as expressions of a male gaze and worldview. As it is so often noticeable in literature, a white male partial perspective is characterized by presumptions of universality. In the three novels, what is claimed to be the representation of the oppression, rebellion and subjugation of the contemporary subject reveals, in fact, a cultural male bias that considers white male pain as emblematic of any pain. This narrow narrative angle especially affects the ways in which gender hierarchies and roles are portrayed and fail to be challenged in classic dystopias, besides failing to depict women as other and more than the male constructions of them. As Sarah Lefanu puts it when discussing women in science fiction, "there are plenty of images of women in science fiction. There are hardly any women" (Lefanu, 13). Women's bodies and sexuality are present in traditional dystopias as disturbing elements threatening the status quo because they serve as instruments of rebellion for the male protagonists. For instance, in Orwell's *1984,* Winston's love affair with Julia drives him to challenge Oceania's ideology, but it does not lead to a reflection on Julia's sexual self-determination or a discussion of the intertwined realities of institutional power and gender roles. A redefinition of the dystopian genre informed by the liberationist counterculture of the late 1960s and 1970s was necessary in order to accomplish sharper and broader social criticism, especially with regards to women's free and independent bodily living.

In fact, coinciding with the emergence of liberationist movements for social change in the late 1960s and 1970s, dystopian fiction was temporarily overshadowed by the renewed popularity of utopian, or eutopian, writing, a literary form that best mirrored the counter-hegemonic forces of that period. The widespread and hopeful belief in social dreams offered an ideal background to utopian texts actively and critically engaging with the deconstruction of all the excluding economic, political and cultural ideologies of mainstream society. Literary works by Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Samuel R. Delany, Ernst Callenbach, Sally Miller Gearhart, and Suzy McKee Charnas

(Baccolini and Moylan, 2) were informed by new projects in the fields of African-American, Third World, gay-lesbian and more critical ecological studies, all part of the political agenda of a new broadly considered Left (Moylan, 31-32). Pivotal to the development of critical utopias in the 1970s, and its subsequent merging with dystopia in the 1980s, was the so-called second-wave feminism, which caused a shift in the way women's subjectivities and bodies were to be discussed. Works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) (Corteil, 157) challenged assumptions that women could only be fulfilled by the realization of their "biological destinies" as (house)wives and mothers.

While denouncing women's ideological and discursive confinement to the domestic sphere, second-wave feminists also strongly demanded new conceptualizations of women's sexuality and the liberation of their bodies from the yoke of a patriarchal and sexist society. Women's reproductive rights and access to safe contraception were, therefore, among the central concerns of the movement and became recurrent themes of the utopian texts in this period. It is significant to stress the correspondence between the rise and decline of hope in society and literary developments: the popularity of utopianism in the 1970s gives us the measure of the then prevalent optimism about social change for the better, just as the dystopian turn of the 1980s – and the twenty-first-century popularity of dystopian trends in books, films and TV series – is, as Mark Hillegas points out, "one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age" (Booker, 16).

1.2 Political and cultural context of the dystopian shift in the 1980s

From the early 1980s, the interest in utopian literature declined in favour of a renewed interest in dystopian fiction. The reasons for this turn are multifaceted and connected with various political, economic and cultural traits of that period. On the one hand, the neoconservative administrations of (among others) Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl (Moylan, xiv) constituted a shift to the right in a political milieu already burdened with Cold War anxiety. It is no surprise that under the well-known slogan of Thatcherism, "TINA" (There Is No Alternative), the utopian imaginary,

fuelled precisely by innovative and proactive envisioning of political and social alternatives, struggled to find fertile ground. Moreover, the neoliberal economic restructuring of that time often resulted in creating more corporate power, which became the post-World War II materialization of the traditional dystopian fear of the "monolithic organisation exerting super normal controls over an unwilling or ignorant population" (Stapleton, 21). Technological breakthroughs raised new fears about runaway growth and destructive potential of technology, one of the main concerns within the dystopian imaginary, just as nuclear paranoia and threat of environmental catastrophe fostered apocalyptic visions of the future. Not surprisingly, then, the dystopian genre was taken up again and reformulated through the utopian impulses of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as through the merging of old and new cultural anxieties and the adoption of a quizzical and self-reflexive postmodern attitude (Baccolini and Moylan, 2).

The renovated dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s were labelled "critical dystopias" by Lyman Tower Sargent in his essay "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994). In the essay, Sargent posits that radical changes in content and formal strategies in contemporary dystopian narratives gave the genre a new utopian impulse and critical consciousness, thus making new dystopias critical expressions of utopianism. While dystopias were often considered bleak visions of the future fuelled by nihilistic anxiety, the new critical dystopias renegotiated the dynamics between utopian hope and anti-utopian despair through hybrid texts that refused any forced closure or a single perspective (Moylan, 105-106). Therefore, dystopias – at least from the 1980s on – should not be interpreted as adverse to utopian thought, but rather as critically engaged with it, bearing in mind that nightmarish visions of the future still belong to the challenging exercise of social dreaming (Baccolini and Moylan, 5) and, because of this, function as counter-narratives.

This applies, for example, to the works of Octavia Butler, Pat Cadigan, Suzy Mckee Charnas, Kim Robinson, Marge Piercy, and Ursula Le Guin – besides, obviously, Margaret Atwood. It is not by chance that many representatives of the new critical dystopias were women. In fact, feminist creative and critical works of those years offered the most effective form of political engagement in

the science fiction genre (Moylan, 36), to which dystopian narratives belonged by extension. Interestingly, the redefinition of the dystopian genre provided a stage that could serve as social laboratory, where up-to-date feminist social and political theories could be dramatized and critically examined through literary representation. Key themes of feminist writing thus became tropes in the new feminist critical dystopias.

Women's physically and ideologically threatened sexuality, reproductive rights, freedom of self-determination over their own bodies and subjectivities were no longer discussed in abstract terms, but rather envisioned in the world through the representational efficacy of literature. The renewed dystopian genre, with its formal flexibility and highly political character, turned out to be the ideal conjunction for social theory and literary expression, to the point that it has been argued that certain dystopian fiction can rightly claim the rank of social criticism itself (Gerlach and Hamilton, 165). However, the association of dystopian thought with feminism – broadly understood here as set of theories aimed at putting an end to women's second-class citizenship, discrimination and exploitation – is also functional to include the term "dystopian" in understandings of the condition of women over time.

Twentieth-century dystopian fiction was certainly not the first literary exploration of repression and violence as experienced by women, as well as of women's strategies for self-preservation and resistance. But the concept of dystopia could now productively be employed to grasp that realities of every-day deprivation of freedom, especially in terms of sexuality and reproduction, have dystopian aspects for the women involved. Therefore, if we understand that certain realist narratives that portray women's subjugation can be conceptualized as dystopias from women's perspective, then the reflections they invite assume new gravity and urgency. My intention is to point out that dystopian fiction is a literary genre as much as a critical lens, thereby highlighting that it can function as an analytical perspective that enables us to better understand women's condition.

Chapter 2:

Dystopian Patterns of Hegemonic Oppression and Counter-Hegemonic Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) can critically be deployed as an analytical framework to better understand the gendered specificity of oppression in a context of slavery, the same core concern of Harriet Jacobs's narrative. *The Handmaid's Tale* is particularly compelling in the ways it outlines and examines not only the bodily subjugation and exploitation women are exposed to by virtue of their very anatomy, but also how the ideological appropriation of their biological features shapes their cultural and social subjugation, especially with regards to their reproductive function. The total conflation of women's sexuality and bodily living with the social mandate of reproduction, as dismally depicted in Margaret Atwood's dystopia, sheds light on the most common and immediate way to conceptualize women and to make sense of their bodies, that is, to render them vessels and carriers of life. In other words, the narrative puts in place a process of female commodification, whereby women's overdetermined social purpose becomes that of serving as instruments and tools for the reproduction of the male social body.

While such views seem to be overtly condemned today, I believe that a dismissal of these themes justified by our current familiarity with them underestimates the subtlety and pervasiveness of discourses based on biological essentialism and determinism, besides failing to contest ideas of common sense, or rather the nonsense of common ideas. To think that Margaret Atwood's dystopian fiction only belongs to the political and social context of the 1980s would be an act of cultural short-sightedness, besides suggesting a dangerous positivist understanding of history as uninterrupted and irreversible collective advancement towards a better condition. Not only is such a worldview the target of the social criticism prompted by dystopian thought, which is fuelled by anxiety and fears about the future, but it also prevents us from formulating historical associations and arguments within the fluid conception of time promoted by the dystopian framework, in which past, present and future

are dynamically interrogated. In fact, by presenting "the present as history, the past as present and the present as future" (Varsam, 210) Margaret Atwood juxtaposes time frames, inviting us to reflect on the continuous presence in history of threats to and ideological and physical suppression of female reproductive and sexual freedom. Therefore, the historical substrate that provided Margaret Atwood with real-world content to be projected in her imaginary society is various and composite. If it is true that any dystopian novel foregrounds, to some degree, the flaws of the author's contemporary social system (Moylan, xii), it must also be noticed that a critique of the present is put in relation with a critique of the past, understood as ever-present absence and haunting legacy. The author herself has argued on several occasions that she only transposed historical motifs and practices into her work of speculative fiction, without the need to invent much completely anew.

In this chapter, I will examine women's condition in the imaginary society of Gilead in order to enable an association and comparison with Harriet Jacobs's account of gendered violence under nineteenth-century slavery, which I suggest to conceptualize as one of the most shocking dystopian experiences in American history. I argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), which is Harriet Jacobs's account of her life in slavery, can be analysed together on various levels, from content to formal strategies, in the attempt to apprehend not only what Margaret Atwood might have borrowed from Jacobs's narrative, but also what the latter might gain in being approached through the analytical lens of a dystopian framework. I am especially interested in comparing the ways in which women's sexual and reproductive lives are depicted in social contexts of legitimized slavery that systematically disavow the violence over their bodies and psyches. By doing so, I intend to outline the experiences of subjugation, struggle for self-determination and hope for freedom of two women whose bodies are enslaved by the cultural and economic organization of their respective social realities. This might illuminate with renovated vigour the constant risk of overdetermination, appropriation and exploitation that various women have commonly faced over history.

2.1 Framing the analysis: *The Handmaid's Tale*'s context and feminist concerns

In order to elucidate how dystopian fiction can productively be used to reflect and comment on historical developments, it will be useful to illustrate two concepts employed by Maria Varsam in her essay "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and its Others" (2003): "concrete dystopia" and "dystopian continuum." Varsam defines concrete dystopias as the historical material basis made up by the events, institutions and systems that writers of dystopian fiction deem "significant enough to extrapolate from in order to warn the reader of future, potentially catastrophic developments" (Varsam, 209). Concrete dystopias, moreover, are conceptualized in adversarial relationship with Ernst Bloch's concrete utopias, which are manifestations of hope for better conditions, which is systematically nullified within dystopian realities:

> Any forces that attempt, or have attempted, to crush the expression of hope by means of physical or psychological violence or to displace desire by means of a physical and/or propaganda machine form the basis from which fear becomes institutionalized in order to establish a new "reality" defined by hierarchy and stasis, censorship, and lack of freedom. Such forces include, but are not limited to, all forms of slavery, genocide, and political dictatorship. Their manifestation is not the prerogative of any one time or society but a potential reality in any time and space in which alienation has been imposed and hope replaced with despair and desire with fear (Varsam, 208-209).

The emphasis on the notion that concrete dystopias can materialize in any time and space ignites a problematization of the processes of history that is typical of dystopian fiction. In Atwood's narrative, for instance, dystopian experiences taken from history overlap, are problematized and displaced into a near-future society, a narrative strategy whereby disparate experiences of violence, alienation and fear are reformulated in order to be understood not merely as historical events, but as living present (Varsam, 210) and worrying possible future. This leads to the conceptualization of the "dystopian continuum," that is, the idea that we can shed light on unexamined or overshadowed facets of historical realities by tracing the dystopian content they present, one that transcends their contingent historical characterization and contextualization and that invites us to draw analogies

between events spatially and temporally distant from each other. Taking into account, for instance, the gendered oppression of women under the system of slavery as described by Harriet Jacobs in her narrative, one can reframe Jacobs's autobiography as dystopian experience by drawing the dystopian continuum that links it to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in so doing, liberate it from its embeddedness in a historical context dangerously perceived as past and closed. Moreover, historian Jill Lepore has defined Atwood's dystopian narrative as an "updating" of Jacobs's, thus corroborating my argument that a comparative analysis of the two works does not merely result in an interplay of literary works, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in a critical reflection on the stories that go beyond the depersonalizing processes of history and on their never-ending remote dialogue.

First, a contextualisation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* will help to map out the development of feminist concerns, like reproductive and sexual self-determination, that takes place in the novel and that will be used as analytical lens to approach Jacobs's narrative from a dystopian perspective. It must be noticed that the novel is clearly situated within the feminist debates of the 1980s. Canadian author Margaret Atwood's career, which began with the publication of her first novel in 1965, overlaps with and went beyond the four decades in which second-wave feminist theories fruitfully rose and developed (Tolan, 1). Although Atwood has always resisted the label "feminist" being attached to her work – "I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting" (Tolan, 2) – and although her political interests go far beyond the feminist debate, much of the theoretical, political and cultural substrate of her works betrays a dynamic, if critical relationship with feminist theory and its main concerns.

In *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007), Fiona Tolan explores such a "coincidence of enquiry" throughout the author's prose works, claiming that Atwood's refusal to be drawn into the feminist camp does not preclude feminist readings of her writing, but encourages them, instead, as long as feminism is understood as a non-monolithic set of theories that enter into dialogue with each other while gravitating towards issues such as sex, gender, womanhood, motherhood, sexuality or reproduction (Tolan, 2-3). Such issues are reflected and problematized in the fictional world of *The*

Handmaid's Tale, showing Atwood's cultural and theoretical awareness of the ideas permeating her time without committing her to a specific school of thought. Moreover, the author's critical stance towards feminist debates corroborates the reading of her dystopian novel as a feminist critical dystopia, which paves the way to the turn of the dystopian genre as I have discussed in section 1.2. Moylan argues that in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood seems to be pushing the classical dystopia to its limits in an effort to find "the right level of cognitive figuration for the bad times of the 1980s" (Moylan, 164). Through a critical renegotiation of the utopian elements that fuel feminist thought, the author shows that even seemingly progressive ideas can harbour repressive potential and that dystopia can originate from a realization of "utopian ends by unexpected means" (Tolan, 152), just like happy dreams turning into nightmares all of a sudden. In reading *The Handmaid's Tale* we have to bear in mind the novel's reclamation of classical dystopias such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, but also the innovative narrative strategies, partly informed by feminist thought, that Atwood employed to design the patterns of oppression the novel's protagonist faces and, most subtly, the patterns of her resistance.

Although feminist concerns provide most of the themes explored in *The Handmaid's Tale* and will be pivotal to my analysis, Atwood does not fail to hint at other political, societal and cultural apprehensions that are object of debate and anxiety worldwide in the 1980s, as the file of newspaper and magazine clippings the author kept during the novel's gestation confirms. The clippings file included pamphlets from Greenpeace, reports from risk countries, information about up-to-date reproductive technologies and forms of institutionalized birth control deployed in Nazi Germany or Ceausescu's Romania, besides material on the so-called New Right with its warnings on "Birth Dearth," its anti-feminism, anti-homosexuality, racism and its strong underpinnings in the Bible Belt (Bloom, 14). A keen eye thus will not fail to notice the connections that can be traced between narrative elements of Atwood's dystopian novel and disparate events, some of which took place around the publication of the novel in 1985. For instance, the condition of widespread sterility among men and women that justifies the subjection of the still fertile Handmaids for reproductive

exploitation was caused, in pre-Gilead society, by increases in toxicity in America due to the devastation of the land, pollution, defoliation and radioactive waste, suggesting Atwood's intent to caution against environmental risks. The figuration of the Colonies of Gilead, which are contaminated areas of North America where barren women are sent and forced to pick over the radioactive waste, is also informed by environmental anxiety. Moreover, the tyrannical theocracy on which the Republic of Gilead is founded is, on the one hand, a horrifying reflection and hyper-exemplification of the religious extremism of the American New Right, but it also calls to mind fundamentalist religious theocracies such as Iran under Khomeini's regime in the 1980s, which Atwood visited just before writing her novel (Wisker, 3).

It is then important to underline that her dystopian world is not placed outside of history as some worlds in science fiction are, but rather within it, as a speculative future of the United States that engages actively with the legacy and memory of the American past. Atwood reached far back into American history to find other examples of subjugating and oppressive deployments of religion in society. In interviews she explicitly mentioned New England Puritanism, whose influence still resonates in American cultural norms (Bloom, 15), and whose dark aspects the novel engages with. She stressed that the Gilead mindset broadly resembles that of seventeenth-century Puritan communities (Bloom, 14). In Gilead many rules, indictments and chastisements which were deployed in Puritan New England are recreated. Moreover, a link can be drawn between the immigration of persecuted and marginalized groups of settlers that reached America hoping to realize there their utopias and the simultaneous development of the forced migration of millions of enslaved Africans that led to the centuries-long dystopia of slavery.

The comparative analysis of Atwood's dystopian novel and Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is precisely justified by a conceptualization of American chattel slavery as concrete dystopia within American history. Overall, both works represent social systems where some individuals have complete power over others in full legality. As Atwood underlined, beyond the many labels that can be attached to her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* is ultimately "a study of power, of how

it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime" (Bloom, 77). The examination and questioning of the workings of power already characterized classical dystopias, mainly preoccupied with the workings of totalitarian power. In Atwood's work, however, the institutionalised and total domination of some individuals over others is explored both in a societal sphere and in a private one, suggesting an analogy with the master-slave relationship characteristic of the US slave system, which we might understand as a totalitarian regime staged in the slaveowner's plantation or household. In his seminal *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Orlando Patterson explains precisely how the slave master's power over the slave life was total and all-encompassing, with slaves "entering into the relationship as a substitute for death" (Patterson, 26).

The study of power as outlined in Atwood's novel, moreover, ignites an understanding of the gender-related implications of relations of power in slavery, the same that Jacobs wanted her readers to reflect on. The exploitation of the Handmaids in Gilead's society being based on their childbearing capacity invites a comparison with the (ab)use of slave women's reproductive capacity as a way to perpetuate the institution of slavery, especially after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. The sexed and gendered character of oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale* provides us with the analytical tools to examine how notions of selfhood, womanhood, motherhood and bodily living and non-living are both constructed through subjection and contested through resistance, for the struggle for freedom is another shared preoccupation of individuals trapped in dystopias, whether they are concrete or fictional. By delineating the ways in which the dehumanizing exercises of hegemonic power posit the enslaved subject's powerlessness and, in parallel, the ways in which speech and action empower the subject's counter-hegemonic fight, I will analyse the themes and technical devices of *The Handmaid's Tale* that will be employed in chapter 3 to understand Jacobs's narrative, and more broadly US slavery, in dystopian terms.

2.2 Hegemonic patterns of psychophysical and ideological oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Republic of Gilead, whose name deceptively suggests a democratic political system, is the near-future dystopian society where *The Handmaid's Tale*'s narrative unfolds. The theocratic regime began after a political sect called "The Sons of Jacob" carried out a coup d'état to overthrow the US government and suspend the Constitution and then progressively built a patriarchal caste society based on a distorted and instrumental interpretation of the Old Testament. Every aspect of the life of Gilead's people is oppressively regulated: social roles and codes of behavior are assigned to men and, more violently, to women according to the social function that they have been assigned to. Those who do not fit into or conform to Gilead's dystopian reality – like African American, Jewish, pro-choice, radical, homosexual or elder people – are disposed of in the Colonies or directly killed, while those who transgress are executed and then publicly exhibited as deterrent against insurrection. Moreover, the demographic crisis due to the ecological disaster that turned most of the population sterile has sparked Gilead's obsession with reproduction.

This translates to the highly repressive status of reproductive slavery for those women who are proven to be still fertile, the so-called "Handmaids". These women have been separated from their former families by force, indoctrinated and trained to be Handmaids in the "Red Centre" – named "Rachel and Leah Centre" after one of the Biblical references[1] used to justify the Handmaids' exploitation – and then assigned to Gilead's leading families, where their role is to give birth to a child conceived through a monthly institutionalised rape formally labelled the "Ceremony". *The Handmaid's Tale* is the first-person narration of Offred, one of the Handmaids, and conveys her perception of the dystopian reality which engulfs and penetrates her. Adopting Offred's focalisation, the reader is invited to emotionally identify and empathize with the main character, imaginatively sharing with her the physical and psychological condition of captivity in which she is held prisoner.

[1] In the Old Testament, Rachel and Leah are sisters married to Jacob. Since Rachel cannot get pregnant, she convinces Jacob to impregnate her handmaid Bilhah, so they can have children "through" her.

In the fashion of dystopian works of fiction, the text opens *in medias res*, when the new social system has already been established. Therefore, the reader is not provided with every detail of the nightmarish society all at once at the outset of the novel in an explanatory and heterodiegetic way. Instead, the knowledge of the "terrible place" unfolds gradually alongside the painful experience of it as Offred goes through it and records places, people, events. As Moylan argues, unlike what happens with realist, naturalistic or mimetic narratives, common and reliable epistemological and aesthetic grounds are broken by dystopian fiction, which challenges the reader to design new cognitive maps (Moylan, 5-6). Due to the lack of a known frame of reference on which one can rely in order to make sense of the represented society, the reader is called to work her way through the text just as the narrator works her way through the constraining new reality that ensnares her. The alienation experienced by the protagonist reflects the "cognitive estrangement" felt by the reader, which was theorized by Darko Suvin in his essay "On the Poetics of Science Fiction Genre" (1970), where he claims cognitive estrangement to be the formal and distinctive framework of texts included in the umbrella genre of science fiction. The reader is asked to get lost in the dystopia and then to draw new cognitive maps through an active readerly process (Moylan, 54) enabled by diachronic and synchronic historical connections, critical reflections on the character of social relations and comparisons between contemporary and past societies.

When confronted with the dystopian world of Gilead, the reader must immediately renegotiate, for instance, the elements of time and space. In fact, Gilead's society is one characterized by temporal stasis and spatial paralysis, which are also symbolized by the widespread condition of sterility among the citizens, a symbolic embodiment of immobility and lack of drive to change. Moreover, in contrast with what might be expected from a society situated in the future, and unlike most societies depicted in dystopian fiction, Gilead does not seem to be at the cutting edge of technology, which is not even considered once in the narrative as a tool to tackle the demographic crisis. On the contrary, attempts to regulate or interrupt pregnancies through technology are punished with death. The society portrayed by Offred gives the impression of standing still in a past time, as

suggested for instance by the description of various features of the house of Offred's "owners," the Commander and his wife Serena Joy. The dominant building materials are wood and bricks, in contrast with the buildings in steel and glass from traditional dystopias. The rug on the floor of Offred's room has "the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women" (Atwood, 7), time is measured by the ringing of bells "as once in nunneries" (8), and the house itself is Late Victorian. The women are portrayed as busy with traditional activities: Serena Joy spends her time gardening or knitting, the Marthas, who are barren women helping with chores in the leading families' households, make bread or shell peas and are characterised by the typical traits of traditional domestic servants: "The Marthas know things, they talk among themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted" (11). The reader's impression of being ensnared in a still time together with Offred is strengthened by the alternation of quasi identical days and nights, as it is also noticeable from the textual structure of the novel where chapters titled "Night" alternate with others titled after daily activities like "Shopping" or "Nap", and places like "Waiting Room" or "Household". Because the occupations with which the Handmaids are permitted to spend time are almost nil – officially, to preserve their reproductive organs, but ultimately to control them more easily – their days are claustrophobically similar and full of blank time:

> There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for – the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound. […] I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems. […] These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom. (69)

The temporal stasis is paralleled by the spatial paralysis that is imposed on Gilead's inhabitants. A static environment is built both at a social and at a domestic level. First, the dystopia is conceptualized as a safe "inside" opposed to the unsafe outside world of the Colonies or other

countries with which Gilead maintains a relationship of indefinite and ongoing war: “This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren’t sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves” (23). Mobility within Gilead is strictly regulated as well. Oftentimes, Offred finds herself blocked by physical barriers like fences or walls, or by human barriers like guards and soldiers. Even when she can move, she is forced to do so by following predesigned paths. Her walks to the grocery store and back are repetitive: “We already know which way we will take, because we always take it” (30). Her monthly visits to the doctor to check the status of her reproductive organs are overdetermined and forced, their unwanted character underlined through the use of the passive form: “Yesterday morning I went to the doctor. Was taken, by a Guardian […]. I’m taken to the doctor once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test; the same as before, except that now it’s obligatory” (59). To sum up, impressions of trapped time and space contribute to the creation of the dystopian scenery where Handmaids – but also Wives, Econowives, Marthas, Aunts, Jezebels and Unwomen, the other categories in which women are grouped in Gilead – act out the roles that they have been assigned to and that now determine the main purpose of their lives.

However, it is mainly through the focus on the experience of reproductive and sexual slavery that Offred allows the reader to grasp the workings of gendered domination and exercise of power as explored by Atwood, and their implications for the construction of notions of womanhood and motherhood in captivity. In fact, Gilead’s stratified society is structured on a system that institutionalises and regulates women’s subjugation, constructing the material and discursive conditions upon which their sexual, domestic, and especially reproductive slavery is based. Offred’s sense of womanhood and motherhood is violated not only through the constant physical and psychological threat of violence and the control and exploitation of her body, but also through indoctrination and a double-sided rhetoric aimed at nullifying women’s free sense of self.

The Handmaid’s Tale can be analysed through the framework provided by Freudian and Foucauldian theories on regulation of sexuality and biopower. As M. Keith Booker points out,

sexuality in the novel is very much a question of political power (164), and is thus subject to a shift from intimate and personal constituent of one's private life to prime site of production and reproduction of power relations. Atwood's dystopian reality unmistakably foregrounds the interests of official power both in repressing people's sexual energies, in keeping with a view of sexual desire as a threat to social order, and at the same time in harnessing those energies in the form of reproductive slavery. Such a dynamic movement of repression and exploitation finds expression both psychophysically and ideologically and targets every woman in Gilead.

The mechanisms of psychophysical repression are evident from the outset of the novel, which is set in the army-like Red Centre. From the first word of the novel, "We", the reader is informed that the depersonalizing process of breeding of the Handmaids is already intruding the protagonist's mind. The first-person narrator begins the tale with a plural pronoun, thus signalling the melting of the self into the social body, more precisely into the social group within which she is now placed. Throughout the narrative, Offred's systematic alienation, dehumanization and commodification come together to construct the dystopian images of womanhood and motherhood in the ways they are portrayed in the novel. The patterns of oppression through which the Handmaids' repression and exploitation is shaped often overlap with and reinforce each other in the pursuit of the common aim to build women's psychophysical state of subjection.

Firstly, Offred's alienation is achieved through the forced separation from her husband and her child, an event whose traumatic memory haunts her. The flashbacks of that moment often intrude the narrative as vivid dreams and are characterised by use of the present tense and dialogue. Offred's present is encumbered by the past: "I hear a voice, *Down*, is it a real voice or a voice inside my head or my own voice, out loud? […] "*Quiet*, I say again, my face is wet, sweat or tears, I feel calm and floating, as if I'm no longer in my body […] I can see her going away from me, through the trees which are already turning red and yellow, holding out her arms to me, being carried away" (75). The systematic tearing apart of families on which Gilead's regime founded its societal reorganization translates into a large-scale diaspora, with fathers murdered and children reassigned to the society's

leading families. The Handmaids carry the trace of their diasporic loss of identity in their new names, which are patronymics assigned on the basis of their masters, like Of-fred or Of-glen. Also, once the Handmaids' alienated bodies have been stripped of their past, serialized reproduction can start.

Dispossessed of any human right, from property and education to freedom of thought and expression, they are now valued exclusively in terms of their reproductive function, as their bodily living is reduced to their anatomies and the social figuration of their womanhood is now debased to chattel status. Throughout the narrative, Offred stresses the animalized and commodified status of the Handmaids. At the Red Centre, their trainers – ironically named "Aunts" – surveil them armed with electric cattle prods; the narrator also explicitly suggests the association with cattle: "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig. Sometime in the eighties they invented pig balls, for pigs who were being fattened in pens […] the pigs rolled them around with their snouts […] I wish I had a pig ball" (69-70). In such terms, the Handmaids' womanhood is appropriated and shaped within what Judith Butler in *Gender Troubles* defines as the "reproductive framework": these women, who are denied the experience of sexuality as articulation of desire and free bodily living, are just breeders now, the meaning of their bodies defined on the basis of the purpose they serve and the social significance they might have. The "Ceremonies", that is to say the monthly institutionalised rapes undertaken in the attempt to conceive a child, emerge as moments of climactic alienation and violent dehumanization:

> I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers. […] My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. […] What's going on in this room […] has nothing to do with passion or love or romance […] it has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me. (94-95)

By enforcing the reproductive slavery of the Handmaids, the dystopian society of Gilead negates conceptions of female sexual autonomy as a category of women's independent identity formation. In fact, Offred's sexual and gender self-determination is always under siege both on a physical and on

a psychological level. Even motherhood, projected as painful memory and certain future loss – in case Offred were able to deliver a child, it would be immediately taken away from her – conflates with the idea of the reiteration of her gendered oppression.

However, not only is the Handmaids' condition informed by practices of material and psychological subjection, but it is also constructed through discursive practices that build up the double-sided ideologies and internal rivalry which frame women's subordination in the novel. The discursive formation of women's condition is brought about by Gilead's ideological double-sidedness, made up by the different myths and images which trap women's actions and determine their social (im)possibilities. The use at will of inverse images existing simultaneously serves to morally justify their exploitation: through the idealization and mythologization of women, their bodies, already physically captive, are further deprived of their freedom on an ideological level by being turned into transcendent icons standing alternatively for lasciviousness or sainthood.

The double-sided rhetoric wrapping women's identities is clearly noticeable in the Handmaids' constraining and body-hiding clothing which conveys mixed imagery. In the novel, the colour red that marks their uniforms is charged with highly symbolic meaning, recalling menstrual blood, fertility and vitality, but it also traditionally stands for seductiveness, suggesting the idea of the scarlet or loose woman (Wisker, 13). Red characterises the protagonist's fate to the degree that it is even embedded in her name: Off-red. Conversely, the white wings around the face that prevent the Handmaids from seeing and being seen are white, the colour denoting purity, virginal state and innocent cleanliness, as it is usually associated with nuns or children. The inverse myths of lasciviousness and sainthood posit the Handmaids as vulnerable and fallible in almost any kind of situation, unveiling that the mandate to live up to the social expectations inscribed on their bodies is a technology of power just as efficient as their material and physical subjugation.

Not only do opposite ideologies influence women's reciprocal cognition of each other, they also determine the most intimate mechanism of self-recognition, showing that dystopias act as an external force that can be dangerously internalized: "My nakedness is strange to me already. My body

seems out-dated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, […] because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (63). "Each month I wait for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own" (73).

The double-sided character of the Handmaids' ideological subordination is also clear from the ways women from other social groups engage with them. The Aunts, whose purpose is to indoctrinate them, regard them as privileged women, honoured with a saintly mission and protected from the dangers of positive "freedom to": "In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (24). The Marthas think of them as licentious women: "I heard Rita say to Cora that she wouldn't debase herself like that" (10), while the infertile, blue-clothed Wives simply despise them and perceive them as domestic rivals, tokens of the Wives' barrenness and ideological oppression. Therefore, it is clearly recognizable that the discursive construction of myths around womanhood with different social meaning and prestige is also meant to ignite internal rivalry among women and processes of reciprocal debasement, all to the benefit of a patriarchal society that makes victims of all women through their ideological and instrumental codification. However, the hegemonic patterns of oppression, which I have outlined in an attempt to draw out how womanhood, motherhood, reproductive functions and sexuality are enslaved in Atwood's narrative, are countered in the text by Offred's counter-hegemonic resistance and drive to hope, which is enacted by her storytelling.

2.3 Counter-hegemonic patterns of resistance within dystopia: storytelling and the utopian impulse to freedom

In the bleak world of Gilead, Offred's dystopian experience of reproductive slavery, claustrophobic physical and ideological captivity and systematic preclusion from self-determination

might seem to construct her as a completely powerless individual, whose subjectivity is appropriated and destroyed by means of exploitative objectification. However, if on the one hand Offred's victimization is evident, on the other hand she does not merely play the part of the victim, and the reader is invited to acknowledge her determined resistance as it is actively performed in different ways throughout the narrative. In fact, her tale is the performance of her resistance and ultimate escape, which the reader is called to witness: in a society which prevents women from standing up for the right to move, think or speak freely, she fuels an utopian impulse to freedom through storytelling and testimony.

Therefore, Offred's narrative itself is a performance of resistance: in the self-enclosed and static dystopian society that engulfs the enslaved, her act of storytelling assumes the significance of an utopian act, one that projects the slave in an alternative space of freedom. Through her authoritative position as first-person narrator, moreover, Offred's pain is voiced in a society that has made every effort to silence enslaved women. Since the novel is, in fact, the "Handmaid's tale", it is clear from the very beginning that paradoxically it is a story of complete powerlessness in which the narrator has complete power over the story. As Fiona Tolan points out, Atwood's narrator is a storyteller who literally creates her audience at a time when even to imagine the possibility of an audience is an act of rebellion (Tolan, 172-173): "If it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one […] I will say *you*, *you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands" (Atwood, 40). Tolan furthermore argues that "by imagining the other, the person on the outside, Offred is also moving towards a liberal concept of the self: the self that can step outside of its society and offer a critique of that society, founded in a system of ethics and justice that exist independently of contemporary concerns" (Tolan, 172).

The reader is asked to rely on and completely identify with the vulnerable narrator, so that, through empathy, the dystopian society can be experienced through the readerly process exactly as Offred experiences it. The perception of the protagonist frames the represented world as dystopian,

and from the discrepancy between the world as perceived and the world as desired, the reader can set her apart from the rest of the population and the dystopian establishment (Varsam, 205). Moreover, as is conventional in dystopian fiction, Offred's privileged perspective is characterised by a "lexis of contemplativeness" that emphasizes her wisdom and philosophical and emotional superiority over the other inhabitants of Gilead (Deer, 91). She stands out as an educated, witty and intelligent woman who employs (bitter) irony and puns as counter-hegemonic uses of language to debunk Gilead's absurdity. For instance, Offred is highly ironic when she contemplates the fate of the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, previously leading soprano for the televised "Growing Souls Gospel Hour" and Christian activist, now turned into disembodied angel of the house: "Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home […] She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (46). Language is deployed as tool of resistance in the form of narrative, but also within the story itself. When the Commander tries to establish a personal relationship with Offred by secretly inviting her to his studio, they play Scrabble, a word game, which for her signifies at least a form of compromised rebellion in a dystopian world that has removed reading and writing as forms of free representation, communication and thought (Wisker, 27).

Another modulation of utopian impulse is introduced in the novel when Offred is approached by Ofglen and informed about the existence of a resistance movement known as Mayday and the "Underground Femaleroad", which offer some personal hope for an alternative life and a possible escape to the women in Gilead. The reference to the Underground Railroad, a clandestine network of safe routes and safe houses which helped enslaved people in the US escape to the North is evident. However, since Offred refuses to actively spy on her master for the Mayday movement, it might be argued that her passivity undermines her rebelliousness.

Nevertheless, it must be noticed that Offred is effectively spying on the Commander's household and Gilead's society as a whole through her tale, providing historical testimony that

eventually will be used to study her time, as is revealed in the last section of the book, titled "Historical Notes", which comments upon Gilead's society from a future and detached perspective. Moreover, I argue that heroism must be renegotiated in captivity, as my analysis of Harriet Jacobs's narrative will show. Expectations of "heroic behavior" risk to nullify the importance of narratives which do not meet conventional standards of heroism, therefore undermining the stories they tell. Offred is as heroic as her condition allows her to be, particularly if we take into account that she is partly held back from subversive action by her hope to see her child again. In fact, her determination to hold on to the memories of her daughter and her past life with her husband Luke is a way to keep safe a sense of her own identity (Wisker, 62).

The flashbacks of and reflections on her past are a constant exercise to keep a part of herself alive in a dystopian reality that has enforced her social death and forced her to experience her womanhood as a sort of disembodied ghost in a Victorian house. Ghosts are a recurrent motif in the narrative: "This is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. Surely they will be able to see through me. […] as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes" (85). Moreover, Offred frequently underlines that she craves objects to hold in her hands, as if the act of holding something could reassure her about the persistent materiality of her body. Bodily alienation is another technology of power to prevent her from envisioning her own sexuality as something other and more than someone else's commodity.

Significantly, however, it is precisely through one of the tools of her oppression that she accomplishes partial freedom: when Serena Joy, suspecting the Commander to be sterile, sets her up with Nick, the family's driver, in order to conceive a child, Nick becomes the catalyst for Offred's utopian impulse for freedom. As they start an affair after their first encounter, Nick is ambiguously characterized both as an inevitable choice and an opportunity for sexual contact which is not completely appropriated, or at least one upon which Offred can still establish a certain amount of control. Significantly, it is Nick who arranges for her escape at the end of the novel. Offred's endurance shows the possibility of some form of utopian resistance in Gilead's dystopian world,

whose all-encompassing oppression seems to halt in front of the figuration of an alternative which the narrative performs. If in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood, on the one hand, examines the deployment of gendered power and domination on an enslaved individual, she also voices that individual's strategies for resistance and struggle for freedom beyond her psychophysical and ideological overdetermination. As I will show, a similar process can be found in Harriet Jacobs's narrative, which I will analyse along the dystopian framework provided by *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Chapter 3:

A Dystopian Reading of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

After analysing how Atwood's dystopian novel portrays a worst-case scenario of women's reproductive slavery and female commodification, I will now proceed by drawing the connections between the dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Jacobs's gendered dramatization of American slavery in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. The utopian impulse that fuels a continuous struggle for self-determination and freedom in the face of institutionalised and systemic female exploitation offers the main ground for comparison. Furthermore, if we use the same analytical strategies and focuses that I used for Atwood's dystopian novel to approach Jacobs's narrative, the latter, written in the specific context of antebellum America, can be updated in order to transcend its original aim, which was to serve the abolitionist cause and provoke collective political action to end the slave system.

In fact, to draw analogies between the ways Gilead's society and the nineteenth-century US slave system degrade, brutalize and destroy slave women's right to reproductive and bodily self-determination means to draw a "dystopian continuum" between Atwood's imaginary dystopian world and Jacobs's painfully concrete dystopian reality. Thus, the gendered horrors inflicted by the institution of American slavery on the female black body, as well as the ways in which that body struck back and fought for freedom, are illuminated by Gilead's dystopian society, which is likewise colour-coded, patriarchal and Christian, as well as grounded in the exploitation of slaves. By approaching Jacobs's narrative with Atwood's novel in mind, the reader is invited to draw analogies between the two and notice that the two women's fights for sexual and reproductive self-determination follow similar trajectories, though belonging to realities that might seem to be totally different. The immediate consequence is that Jacobs's story, placed in a remote and seemingly circumscribed context, is problematized and gains renewed relevance, and a nineteenth-century narrative is freed from its historical contingency.

Besides engaging with similar issues, the two narratives are also interesting for a comparative analysis of the formal strategies they use to convey the themes and contents they both deal with. As in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the main voice of *Incidents* is a first-person female narrator who performs an act of testimony to her own oppression, an act of accusation of a system that enforces her commodification, dehumanization and reproductive and sexual exploitation, and an act of reversal of the master-slave hierarchical relationship, given that she is the ultimate master of her own story. Through the protagonist's focalisation, the dystopian experience of female slavery unfolds before the reader, who is called to learn from and reflect on it as Linda Brent, Jacobs's pseudonym, perceives it. In other words, the reader is invited to follow the narrator in a "hermeneutic process of disclosure" (Varsam, 207), understood as a narrative process that is not limited to mimetically representing the world as it is, but that rather seeks to detect the present's latent potential for developing into a better, or worse, future.

Moreover, since dystopian narratives typically feature a protagonist who perceives society as oppressive and repressive, Linda's condition in the antebellum American South can be conceptualized as dystopian, following Deborah Gray White's claim that the slave woman's condition is an extreme case of what women as a group experienced in nineteenth-century America: "Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum Americans" (White, 15). Like Gilead's dystopian society, the US slavery system conceptualized slave women as sexually and reproductively exploitable objects, silencing them and, consequently, erasing them from history and memory. In addition, White underlines that, even in historical studies aimed at analysing slavery and its legacy, women's condition has often been considered somehow peripheral, and is therefore peripherally addressed (White, 23).

Much earlier than the 1980s, when scholarly attention was increasingly paid to slave women's condition, Jacobs managed to give voice, visibility and centrality to slave women's sexed and gendered experiences of slavery, and to the questions peculiar to their specific state. How to retain a

sense of free womanhood against a social system that reduces it to the state of reproductive machine, stressing women's procreative ability as the only one that matters? How to reverse the meaning of giving birth from an appropriated site of gendered exploitation to life-affirming action? How to be shocked by physical and ideological sexual abuse of women's bodies within a system that normalizes it? Jacobs's narrative addresses similar issues as Atwood's novel a century before the rise of the black civil rights and feminist movements, making a shift in the ways oppression and resistance, slavery and freedom were to be understood when women were concerned. Before proceeding with an analysis of Jacobs's narrative, I will briefly give an overview of its historical and literary background, thereby showing how the gap between Atwood's dystopian fiction and Jacobs's slave narrative can be bridged.

3.1 Historical context and dystopian framing of the slave narrative

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself was published in 1861, just before the American Civil War started, and it is usually defined as a slave narrative, a genre consisting of former slaves' autobiographical accounts of life under slavery and their empowering escape North to pursue freedom. Such narratives became pivotal documents for the abolitionist movement, fuelling its systemic critique of the institution of chattel slavery and the need for its abolition, also through the personal testimonies of former enslaved individuals. Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents*, lived as a slave in North Carolina from her birth in 1813 to her flight North in 1842, where she successively met antislavery lecturers and feminists in the early 1850s. With the help of influent black and white acquaintances, above all her friend Amy Post and the well-known abolitionist and women's rights activist Lydia Maria Child (who became the editor of Jacobs's narrative), Jacobs succeeded in getting her story published, though the omission of the author's name on the original title page was among the factors that complicated the authentication of the narrative. As a matter of fact, most names of people and places in the book (including Jacobs's) are fictive as precaution, and for various reasons *Incidents* was dismissed as a work of fiction for a long period of time. It was only when scholar Jean

Fagan Yellin was working on a new edition of the text in the 1980s that *Incidents* was recognized as authentic and the identity of people and places in the narrative was established.

However, the novelty of Jacobs's text does not reside in its authentication process, which was often problematic in the case of slave narratives, but rather in its content. In the introduction to the 1987 republication of *Incidents* she edited, Yellin argues that the narrative has revolutionary value because it is the first slave narrative told from a woman's perspective, one that succeeded in unveiling the double oppression of chattel slavery and of traditional patriarchal institutions and ideologies to which female women's bodies in nineteenth-century America were subjected (Yellin, xiii). The main theme of Jacobs's narrative, in fact, is the sexual harassment she experienced under her master Dr. Norcom (Dr. Flint in the text), from whom she eventually escaped choosing to become pregnant by a white neighbour, the lawyer Samuel Sawyer (Mr. Sands), thus transgressing the sexual standards which regulated unmarried women's conduct at the time, even in conditions of slavery.

Through the politicization of her own private sexual history, Jacobs addressed the forbidden topic of slave women's sexual abuse as a gendered aspect of slavery that needed public political discussion, especially given its invisibility or marginal presence in male slave narratives. Just as underlined with reference to male classical dystopias in section 1.2, the narrative male gaze, unconsciously or not, often threatens to overshadow and decentralize the peculiar gendered and sexed oppression faced by women. Although slave narratives written by men, such as Frederick Douglass's classic 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* or William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847), sometimes include the issues of slave women's sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation, they tend to treat them as instances of abuse that have disenfranchised the male protagonist's masculinity and sense of empowered self (Levine, 92). For instance, in the view of male narrators, rape occurred to deprive the male slave of a sense of masculinity, as it foregrounded his lack of power to protect the women close to him. How institutionalised and systemic sexual abuse affected slave women's notions of sexuality, womanhood and motherhood had not been further explored before Jacobs's narrative. With

her revolutionary female angle of vision, Jacobs placed women's threatened bodies and selves at the centre of the discussion on slavery, very much as Atwood placed women at the core of her cautionary social tale one century later, when civil rights and women's rights movements were making history.

A dystopian approach to *Incidents* informed by *The Handmaid's Tale* can elucidate what Atwood might have borrowed from the imagery of US slavery, but also what her dystopian novel might contribute to our understanding of Jacobs's portrayal of slavery as sexed and gendered form of domination. In the first place, a dystopian approach is adopted by reflecting on the characteristics of the narrator. As in Offred's case in *The Handmaid's Tale,* Linda Brent begins her story *in medias res,* already within the terrible place, and then gradually unfolds her own experience of slavery to the reader, who is called to identify with her through the device of a first-person narration of events. Although Jacobs's narrative, unlike *The Handmaid's Tale,* is written as a retrospective account of events, and the reader's identification with the narrator is at times undermined by the author's distanced and occasionally judgemental gaze, it is nevertheless true that the reader is brought back to the immediacy of lived experience through the numerous dialogic scenes and the engaging dramatic tension. A dystopian conceptualization of the narrator suggests that we are not projected outside the system of slavery with the freed author, but in the very midst of it together with the oppressed narrator. If Jacobs's text is approached with the active readerly process required by dystopian fiction, which defamiliarizes the reader from its usual cognitive maps, then the reading of *Incidents* can become an active experience of making sense of history from a woman's perspective and can assume the value of a re-cognition of slave women's misrecognized or unrecognized experiences of gendered slavery.

Moreover, a dystopian approach to Jacobs's narrative can be enabled if we frame *Incidents* in terms of dystopian notions of time and space, showing how the setting of Jacobs's narrative can be understood as dystopian. In fact, both on the microlevel of her master's household and on the macrolevel of the slaveholding American South, Jacobs's narrative appears to be characterized by the same temporal and spatial immobility that frames dystopian worlds, especially Gilead. The renegotiation of time and space can be therefore guided by the notions of temporal stasis and spatial

paralysis discussed in my analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* in section 2.2. Firstly, time often seems to stand still in Jacobs's narrative. As Maria Holmgren Troy points out in her analysis of *Incidents'* chronotopes – a concept formulated by Bakhtin to indicate literary configurations of time and space in different literary genres – time is not entirely linear in the text, although the narrative can be considered as belonging to the autobiographical genre (Troy, 20). Linear temporal movement permeates the narration, and the text continuously references temporal designations such as years and months (Troy, 20), but the word "Incidents" in the title indicates a disrupted time, ensnared within a dimension of captivity that prevents any progression. Instead of being the account of a life unfolding, then, the narrative becomes the account of a constricted and fragmented life, recurrently trapped in a different incident. The sense of fragmentation is not even held together by the cyclical figuration of time that characterises the slave society. The cyclical character of time, which governs everything from the rhythms of the harvest on the plantation to those of women's reproductive capacity, does nothing but reiterate the impression of a still system thriving in a still time and reproducing itself through women's bodies "in a circular repetition of abuse and oppression" (Troy, 21). The cyclical nature of time engulfs Linda Brent and traps her into a dystopia whose temporality shapes and determines her existence. The contrast between the protagonist's desire for forward impulse and the static, though seasonal, environment in which she is trapped is perfectly dramatized in the seven years that Linda spends in hiding in the garret of her grandmother's house, a sequence that makes up almost a quarter of the book. Throughout the account of that experience, the impression of time passing by along with the changing of seasons conflicts with that of still time conveyed by Linda's physical immobility: "O, those long, gloomy days, with no object for my eye to rest upon, and no thoughts to occupy my mind, except the dreary past and the uncertain future!" (Jacobs, 116-117).

Spatial paralysis is another feature that *Incidents* shares with *The Handmaid's Tale*, and, in general, with the imagery of dystopian fiction. Paralysis here is both intended as broad attitude of refusal to change on the part of the American slavery system, as well as the effect of the technologies of power used to impose immobility, and therefore control and surveillance, on the enslaved

individuals. On the one hand, just like Gilead, the slave society surrounding Linda is static. The nineteenth-century rural American South was in effect characterised by immobility in comparison with the dynamic and industrialized Northern states, and the traditional association of a warm climate with a lethargic and indolent attitude reinforces the idea of a paralysed society. However, it is mostly through its self-enclosed and monitoring character that the slave system displays dystopian features. Like Gilead, the dystopia of slavery is conceptualized, at least by hegemonic discourse, as an "inside" opposed to the unsafe "outside" of the Northern states. In the chapter titled "What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North," the narrator argues that Southern slaveowners tell "enormous lies" about the condition of runaway slaves in the North: "A slaveholder once told me that he had seen a runaway friend of mine in New York, and that she besought him to take her back to her master, for she was literally dying of starvation" (Jacobs, 43). By debunking the utopian illusion of freedom in the Northern states, Southern masters mentally walled their slaves within the slave system, presenting any alternative to it as undesirable. Mobility within the system itself was strictly regulated as well. Linda and her moves are always under surveillance – "My movements were very closely watched" (42) – with her freedom of movement first hindered by Dr. Flint's control and harassment, then by her concerns about her two children and the need to protect them and her struggle to set them free. A mental wall is created to trap slaves within the concrete dystopia surrounding them.

To sum up, analogies between the role of the narrator in Atwood and Jacobs's narratives, as well as figurations of time and space as simultaneously trapped and trapping, inform a dystopian conceptualization of Jacobs's text. Furthermore, the analytical framework provided by *The Handmaid's Tale* invites to reflect on the enslaved women's bodily exploitation as regards sexuality and reproduction in the attempt to unveil the gendered and sexed character of the dystopian experience of slavery. *The Handmaid's Tale* and, more broadly, the dystopian framework will help to outline how, in *Incidents,* the overdetermination of oppressive views of sexuality, womanhood and motherhood on the part of the slave system is countered by the protagonist's attempt to gain free sexuality, womanhood and motherhood through her utopian acts of resistance.

3.2 Patterns of oppression: gendered alienation, commodification and exploitation

Women's subjugation in *Incidents* and, more broadly, under American chattel slavery takes place through the deployment of technologies of power analogous to the ones found in Atwood's dystopian novel and consisting of a dual domination: the psychophysical violence inflicted on the slave girl and the construction of the ideological justification and rationalization of that very violence. Through the dramatization of her efforts to prevent her master from raping her, Jacobs gave voice to an aspect of female slavery that would long be overlooked, or perhaps taken for granted: the sexual abuse of slave women and its implications for slave women's conceptualizations and experiences of womanhood and motherhood.

Just as in Gilead the Handmaids are valued only on the basis of their childbearing capacity, in the slaveholding society described by Jacobs slave girls seem to share a common destiny of sexual exploitation for reproductive purposes: "Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (Jacobs, 49). Showing deep knowledge of women's condition in the nineteenth-century American South, probably due to her later active commitment to the abolitionist movement, Jacobs often zooms out from her own story and inserts anecdotal episodes into the narrative in order to exemplify how domination under slavery assumed the form of reproductive slavery for women. In the narrative, it is apparent how the process of instrumental commodification of women's sexuality and of their reproductive ability offers a site for the production and the reproduction of the power relation between the master and the slave girl: "The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences" (Jacobs, 35). The sexual abuse committed against slave women for the purpose of increasing the slave population is what most evidently shapes women's experience of slavery as different from men's: "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was

heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (Jacobs, 77).

Far from establishing a gendered hierarchy of pain in slavery, I argue that it is possible to better grasp the gendered aspects of oppression described by Jacobs by looking at her narrative bearing Atwood's novel in mind. For instance, Gilead's mechanisms of alienation, dehumanization and commodification of women are comparable to the ways the institution of slavery alienates, dehumanizes and commodifies slave women. Linda frequently underlines how forced separation from the family, and especially from the children, is a constant threat to the slave woman. Slaves face separation and alienation in the case of the death of their master, when they are redistributed among the master's family members. Furthermore, in the chapter titled "The Slaves' New Year's Day", the narrator describes how slave auctions take place, setting the stage for the slaves' diaspora: "I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that *some* of them would be taken from her; but they took *all*" (Jacobs, 16). Dr. Flint then repeatedly threatens Linda to sell her children in his ongoing efforts to control her. It reminds Gilead's abduction of children to redistribute them among the leading families: in both cases, the social matrix of enslaved individuals is torn apart so that the hegemonic slavery system may thrive.

In addition, processes of dehumanization and commodification of women are repeatedly pointed out by Linda, and associations with animals are frequently used to stress women's function as breeders: "Notwithstanding my grandmother's long and faithful service to her owners, not one of her children escaped the auction block. These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend" (Jacobs, 8); "Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable pigs on the plantation" (36). The image of the pig, also recalled by Offred (Atwood, 69-70), metaphorically reflects hegemonic notions of

womanhood and motherhood that serialize reproduction, shaping the latter merely as increase of the master's property.

The analogies between the condition of the Handmaids and that of slave girls in the antebellum American South mainly revolve, therefore, around the ways their sexuality and reproductive function are codified by their respective societies. Atwood's dystopian novel figures a world where rape and sexual abuse not only are tolerated, but rather are prescribed and ritualized. This kind of legal codification of gender subjection recalls Saidiya Hartman's argument in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). Among the several displays of mastery explored in her investigation of racial subjugation in slavery, Hartman repeatedly focuses on the master's domination performed through sexuality. Although it must be underlined that the deployment of power through sexuality targeted also male salves, only for women did sexual violation and domination shape the very constitution of the subject "slave woman" and, almost automatically, that of "slave mother". Hartman clarifies that it is not her intention to "reproduce a heteronormative view of sexual violence as only and always directed at women, but rather to consider the terms in which gender (and the category woman in particular) becomes meaningful in a legal context in which subjectivity is tantamount to injury" (Hartman, 97), a concern which is pivotal in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well.

Hartman's argument, then, elucidates how the normalization of women's sexual abuse in the context of slavery influenced slave women's construction of subjectivity, along with the ideological justification of the various acts of violence they were destined to face. For instance, the constant exposure of women's bodies while they were auctioned or while they were working in the fields nourished one of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America: the Jezebel myth[2] (White, 28). Accused of insatiable libido, the black woman was commonly depicted as looking for sexual intercourse with white "lovers" and even "honoured" by the idea of "bringing a mulatto

[2] Jezebel is a Biblical character, archetype of the wicked, shameless, or morally unrestrained woman.

into the world" (White, 30). In addition, causal correlations were drawn between sexuality and fecundity, so that the slave women's reproductive rates were held as evidence of their uncontrolled lust instead of the ruthless sexual exploitation they suffered at the hands of their masters (White, 31). This partly explains why the rape of an enslaved woman was "an offense neither recognized nor punished by nineteenth-century American law" (Hartman, 79). Since rape was defined as "the forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will and without her consent" (Hartman, 79), the image of the lascivious and libidinous slave impeded from conceptualizing her as unwilling to undergo sexual intercourse. In Jacobs's narrative, the helplessness of the slave woman in the light of the systemic construction and ideological justification of her subordination is often underlined. When Linda starts recounting how Dr. Flint's sexual harassment began as she turned fifteen, she immediately points out that the slave woman is left completely unprotected in such circumstances: "There is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage" (Jacobs, 27-28).

If we use the dystopian framework provided by *The Handmaid's Tale* to analyse how women's physical and ideological subordination is represented in Jacobs's narrative, we can grasp better how slave women's sexual exploitation is systematically designed by the slavery system, and not merely an accidental aspect of slave women's lives. In fact, Offred's condition as Handmaid offers a perspective that we can use to consider how Jacobs's violation is at the same time normalized and negated through discourse. Just as is the case with the Handmaids, in Jacobs's narrative the slave woman's sense of personhood is continuously threatened by sexual domination, which constitutes female gender as "the locus of both unredressed and negligible injury" (Hartman, 80). The sexual, physical and ideological acts of violence experienced by the Handmaids in a dystopian setting elucidate how the sexual abuse of slave women was not just an accidental possibility of their state, but a systemic and inherent condition around which the entire system of slavery was produced and reproduced. In other words, Jacobs's "incidents" had not an incidental character, but rather they

determined the entire life of the slave girl subject. Moreover, just as the Handmaids' condition is based on routinized violence, so the harassment described by Jacobs appears to be endemic in Dr. Flint's household: "My master met me at every turn, reminding him that I belonged to him […] The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. May of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof" (Jacobs, 28). To conceptualize the slave woman as the protagonist of the dystopia of American slavery means to situate her at the centre of a system instituted to dispossess her of herself, to surveil her in every move and to crush any expression or figuration of utopian hope for freedom.

Furthermore, Gilead's dystopian society helps us to understand how, within a patriarchal regime that overdetermines women's roles in the world, mutual rivalry, arbitrary prejudice, and reciprocal mistrust among the oppressed are used to prevent and impede solidarity. Using the relationship between Offred and Serena Joy as model, the reader can reflect on the hostile interaction between Linda and Mrs. Flint, which dramatizes the collision of interiorized patriarchal myths and ideals. If in Jacobs's concrete dystopia Linda and more broadly slave women are reconducted to the Jezebel myth, Dr. Flint's wife appears instead as the embodiment of its counterimage: the Victorian lady (White, 28). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena Joy is portrayed as the angel of the house who preaches the gospel of domesticity. When Offred intrudes upon her domestic domain, Serena Joy does not seek for complicity, but rather reiterates the female hierarchy imposed by her society on a macrolevel within the private domain of her house:

"So, you're the new one, she said. She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so. […] I was disappointed. I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me. […] But I could see already that I wouldn't have liked her, nor she me" (Atwood, 13-16).

In the same way, Linda immediately senses hostility when she joins the Flints: "When we entered our new home we encountered cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment" (Jacobs, 9). From that moment

on, and especially after Dr. Flint begins to prey on Linda, Mrs. Flint projects onto her the crimes of her own husband. In the chapter titled "The Jealous Mistress", Jacobs covers all the unpleasant, when not violent, behaviors of Mrs. Flint: "For them [the slaves] she had no sympathy. They were the objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence" (31); "Every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. […]. Yet […] I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet" (32); "She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed" (33); "I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed" (34).

Noticeably, as the previous quotations underline, Linda is obviously aware of the workings of the reality around her, unlike other oppressed characters that have interiorized oppressive practices and ideologies and are unable to rebel, like Mrs. Flint and Serena Joy. It can be said that Jacobs's narrator has the same philosophical and moral superiority that is characteristic of the dystopian narrator (Deer, 91). In creating a protagonist/narrator who has an enhanced awareness, Jacobs provides the reader with a privileged perspective that offers not only a representation of systemic oppression, but also a fierce critique of it (Varsam, 211). Only by empathizing and identifying with the oppressed protagonist's perspective can the reader perceive the dystopian reality as she experiences it, and Linda can be understood precisely as a subjective narrator making her way out of the system that fuels her gendered exploitation. By focusing on the protagonist's experience as she recounts it, therefore, we can also trace Jacobs's patterns of resistance and utopian fight as illuminated by a comparison with Offred's narrative. Through the utopian acts of storytelling and testimony in a world that does not allow any form of alternative life, not even through imagination, Jacobs makes a shift from the image of the powerless slave girl to that of the empowered woman, following Offred in her patterns of resistance.

3.3 Patterns of resistance: fighting for utopia through storytelling and testimony

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's act of telling and testifying to her experience of sexual and reproductive slavery enables her utopian pursuit of freedom and constitutes her performance of resistance and ultimate escape. Analogously, it is possible to understand Jacobs's text as a performance of personal and collective resistance within the concrete dystopia that surrounded her. Considering that *Incidents* seeks to convey the knowledge of slavery as lived and immediate experience, the whole narrative can be considered as the protagonist's utopian act of projecting herself into a utopian future of freedom outside the depicted dystopian world. In addition, the fact that *Incidents* was a literary work conceived to challenge and hopefully overturn the social system based on slavery adds to its utopian value.

Thus, the act of testimony and the desire to fight for a better future are the main trajectories of resistance that allow us to analyse *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Incidents* together. In fact, there would be no need to tell a dystopian story without the hope to overturn the dystopian world, whether fictional or concrete, that originated it. As Varsam points out, such a didactic function of social critique and education is the point where the two different genres of dystopian fiction and slave narrative meet on an extra-textual level (Varsam, 212).

In *Incidents*, the sections of the narrative where the utopian dimension surfaces most evidently are Linda's direct apostrophes to the reader: "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage" (Jacobs, 29); "O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the law reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another" (55). In the way Offred creates her audience to give meaning to her own story, Jacobs confers effective meaning and significance to her story by directly addressing the white women in American Northern states, calling them to join forces and create a sisterhood of women belonging to different races and classes in order to end their common, though different, oppression (Yellin, xxxiii). In fact, not only did Jacobs call for public

witnessing and debate on women's condition under slavery, but she also called for an end of the double oppression of slavery and patriarchy to which black women in nineteenth-century America were subjected.

If her story, like critical dystopias, gains utopian force on an extra-textual level, it must also be underlined that the act of telling constitutes a tool of resistance in the form of narrative. Through the enfranchising power of language, Linda actualizes the reversal of power that distinguishes dystopian narratives in general, and Offred's in particular, whereby the enslaved woman shows absolute mastery of the narrative as a way to emancipate herself from her condition. In this regard, literacy plays a central role in allowing Linda's shift from powerlessness to power, as the narrative's subtitle "Written by herself" seems to mark in the way it asserts proud authorship. As Lindon Barrett points out, literacy has long been conceived in terms of empowerment in the Western cultural imagination, dividing animal from human beings, slave from citizen, object from subject, and ultimately blacks from whites (Barrett, 418). To be excluded from literacy resulted in being fixed in a given identity, without the possibility to develop independent thought and action. Since the US slave system, similarly to Gilead's society, forbids teaching slaves to read and write, to acquire and exercise such skills constitutes Linda's very first act of rebellion and escape. By gaining literacy, Linda can gain the instruments for extending herself beyond the condition and geography of her body (Barrett, 419), that is to say, beyond the constraining dystopia around her.

In the fashion of dystopian fiction, language in *Incidents* becomes an instrument of resistance in the form of narrative, but it is also used within the narrative itself to perform resistance. Bearing in mind the Scrabble matches between Offred and the Commander as part of Offred's acts of textual rebellion, the reader can observe how the mastery of language is essential for Linda to resist and counter Dr. Flint's persecution. First, when he tries to submit her verbally through notes and messages, Linda pretends to not understand them, mimicking illiteracy to trick him. Her opposition to his harassment materializes as textual resistance. At a later time, during the period she spends in hiding in her grandmother's garret, she regularly writes him false letters in order to make him believe

she is in New York and make him lose faith in her possible surrender and return. The title of the chapter where the exchange of letters is recounted, "Competition in Cunning", makes explicit that the slave women's fight for free bodily living is mediated by the progressive conquest of free intellectual being. In fact, the acquisition of an imaginative site of free thought and representation is essential to set the ground for the renegotiation of female selfhood, humanity, and identity.

Moreover, Linda's display of intelligence, irony, and wit is yet another narrative device employed by Jacobs to invite the reader to empathize with the narrator and to trust her focalisation. Jacobs's documentation of the slave society's oppression thus assumes one of the main traits of dystopian fiction, where the demystification of the dystopian society is led by a protagonist who seems able to make the workings of the dystopian system intelligible. As Moylan argues, dystopian storytelling typically develops around an alienated subject, who gradually traces the connections between her individual experience and the workings of the social system as a whole (Moylan, xiii). While debunking the concrete dystopia of slavery just like Offred debunks Gilead's society, Linda provides the implied reader with a privileged perspective on the US slavery system, unveiling its horrors and their deceiving ideological justification. Irony (bitter, in most cases) is among the most employed techniques through which this aim is accomplished. Her ironic remarks allow her to invite the reader's complicity in her aim to overturn accepted views of US slavery system as Christian and civilized society, whose falsity is proved by the behavior of her master and mistress: "My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' […] But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor" (Jacobs, 8); "Mrs. Flint made her usual manifestations of Christian feeling" (136); "When I was told that Dr. Flint had joined the Episcopal church, I was much surprised. I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant" (74).

Noticeably, Linda's irony is often aimed at the institution of religion, the same pillar upon which Gilead's society is constructed. In fact, just as is the case in Gilead, Linda's society displays

religion and employs it as a technology of power to justify black people's oppression. The template of *The Handmaid's Tale* is useful to understand the ideological and instrumental use of religion, which Linda exposes in the chapter titled "The Church and Slavery". The words of Reverend Pike's service quoted in the chapter seem to echo one of Gilead's fixed greetings, "Under his eye": "God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. […] Your masters may not find out, but God sees you, and will punish you. […] You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. […] If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master" (69). Offred and Linda illuminate the ways God and religion are used to reinforce the ubiquitous surveillance under which the inhabitants of the dystopia are placed. To debunk their masters' bogus religiosity, which is among the fundamental bases of their masters' hegemonic power over them, allows them to avoid such a surveillance and to enact their counter-hegemonic narrative.

With the unfolding of Jacobs's text, the pattern of the protagonist's counter-hegemonic resistance is delineated ever more evidently in the shape of a fight. In fact, although Linda is called to face and overcome numerous difficulties and wrongs, her tone is anything but resigned. Despite expressing deep sorrow and hatred for her state, her narrative, like Offred's, does not resolve itself into a self-pitying surrender or a display of sensational pain, but it rather becomes a fierce war: "The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered. Alas, for me!" (19). The paradigm of the personal and collective war against the system is another dystopian trope, whereby the opposition to the oppressive regime, also with the help of a subterranean network of resistance, fosters the narrative's utopian drive. It is, however, clear how the identification and characterisation of Linda as a victim of the slavery system does not negate her role as active agent in it (Hartman, 107). Gloria Randle argues that Jacobs employs a military language ("triumph," "tyrant," "defeat") to underline the gravity of her situation and her determination to resist at any cost (Randle, 50). On a personal level, Linda fights against Dr. Flint, first by plotting to avoid his sexual abuse and then to conquer freedom for herself and her two children. When she makes the drastic decision to become pregnant by a white neighbour, whom she is "thankful not to despise"

(59), in order to avoid becoming her master's concubine, she replaces passive resignation with proactive rebellion (Randle, 49). Such an act, done with "deliberate calculation" (54), is used as a utopian weapon against Dr. Flint: "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another […] It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you" (55). "I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling *him*" (56). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's romantic affair with Nick catalyses her utopian impulse for freedom. Similarly, Linda's exercise of agency through relatively unbounded sexuality becomes a possibility for self-determination in *Incidents*.

Furthermore, after Linda gives birth to her two children, she counters Dr. Flint's attempts to seize them by plotting their buying and freeing by their father Mr. Sands. Considering Linda's experience of motherhood, it must be noticed that, despite Dr. Flint's attempts to reduce it to mere reproduction of property – "Dr. Flint […] did not fail to remind me that my child was an addition to his stock of slaves" (Jacobs, 61) – Linda manages to renegotiate motherhood as tool of resistance, partially freeing it from connotations of domination and normativity exerted on the female slave's body. Although her choice of becoming a mother is marked by the limited possibilities, constraint, despair, and duress that condition the giving of the self in slavery (Hartman, 104), Linda confers upon her children the significance of "ties to life", as it surfaces from the titles of the chapters where their birth is recollected. What could have become yet another tie to the dystopian condition of slavery is turned, on the contrary, into drive to freedom and utopian promise that makes dystopia survivable.

The desire to protect and watch over her own children is the reason why Linda spends seven years in hiding in the grandmother's garret as part of her fight against Dr. Flint and, on a macrolevel, against the system around her. Troy argues that the garret can be conceptualized as Linda's war headquarters, used to spy on her enemy and to wage psychological warfare against him. Just as Offred undertakes her silent resistance against Gilead from a seemingly disembodied and ghostly perspective, so does Linda use the garret in order to adopt the survival strategy of "playing dead", or

"thanatomimesis." Georgia Kreiger argues that thanatomimeses are acts such as those of wounded soldiers on battlefields or those of victims of animal attacks, who "play dead" in order to thwart the animal's further aggression (Kreiger, 607). From her tomb-like crawl space, Linda plays dead in order to defy her predator and function as disembodied observer of her dystopian community. Therefore, once again the protagonist succeeds in developing strategies of resistance with the aim of turning a condition of extreme hardship into an opportunity to fight back.

To sum up, if we bear in mind the trajectory of Offred's resistance and opposition to her reality and use it as lens to analyse Linda's, we notice how sexuality and motherhood can be renegotiated as sites of resistance, and how women can interrupt the reproduction of oppression and violence that takes place through their bodies. Offred and Linda's patterns of resistance seem to be symmetrical: starting from a condition of helplessness and powerlessness, they use language to make space for utopian hope in their hopeless dystopian societies, finding in themselves and other people resources, help, and solidarity. In fact, dystopian fiction also helps to foreground that resistance, exactly like oppression, is characterised by a collective and communitarian dimension. The genre's typical existence of a subterranean network of solidarity and reciprocal help between single individuals is often the narrative twist that enables the protagonist's ultimate escape, as confirmed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Similarly, in *Incidents* Linda finds protection in her grandmother's house and within the dimension of the town community, but also in the acquaintances in the North who help her to flee slavery. If we employ the dystopian device of the subterranean conspiracy against the hegemonic system to frame Linda's escape and conquest of freedom, and more broadly Jacobs's abolitionist commitment, it surfaces clearly that resistance relies on collective action. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Incidents* demonstrate that dystopias can be escaped, but also discursively deconstructed and concretely overturned, as long as the protagonist emancipates herself from her state of alienation and joins with her counter-hegemonic narrative the choir of voices that fictional and concrete dystopian societies seek so hard to silence.

Conclusion

My comparative analysis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Jacobs's *Incidents* has shown how dystopian fiction extrapolates from history to build nightmarish societies which echo real ones, but also how certain historical experiences can be revitalized and actualized through a dystopian conceptualization. On the one hand, I have underlined that Atwood's novel recalls women's reproductive and sexual exploitation in the context of American chattel slavery, in which slave women's abuse was normalized and virtually prescribed by the system itself. On the other hand, I used a dystopian approach to read Jacobs's testimony as dystopian in terms of setting and narrative trajectories in order to actualize it and to liberate it from its historical context.

My analysis shows that we can give value to some underrated critical aspects of dystopian fiction by drawing the dystopian continuum that links Jacobs's text to Atwood's novel. In fact, since dystopian narratives are too often misunderstood as prophecies, the historical events, institutions and systems that form their material basis and inform their warnings tend to be overlooked. I do not mean to deny that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary tale. On the contrary, since we have the possibility to read it from a future perspective, we can grasp Atwood's warnings even better by reflecting on current women's conditions in terms of reproductive and sexual freedom and self-determination in the US. However, the focus of my analysis was to examine how *The Handmaid's Tale* engages with the concrete dystopias it draws from, in particular the US slavery system, to demonstrate that the need for dystopian warnings about the futures originates from reflections on the past and its haunting character.

Therefore, by juxtaposing *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Incidents* I was able to reflect on the concrete dystopia of US slavery, paying particular attention to its gendered aspects and implications, an angle of vision which is suggested by Atwood's text. In fact, *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates the ways in which coercive power, psycho-physical alienation, body commodification and systemic destruction of identity characterise women's experience of slavery in *Incidents*. Atwood's novel also

invites us to reflect on the ways sexual violence and appropriation of motherhood shape the slave woman's construction of the subject as site of production and reproduction of oppression. By doing so, the gender-specific features of a historical phenomenon can emerge with renewed clarity.

To some extent, the dystopian framework used to analyse *Incidents* allows us to read Jacobs's story as we would read a dystopian work of fiction: paying attention to the ways the system crushes any expression of utopian hope and those in which, conversely, the protagonist performs hope and resistance in and through her narrative. Jacobs invites the reader to empathize and identify with the oppressed narrator and to experience the concrete dystopia of US slavery from within. I argue that the perspective provided by a dystopian approach to Jacobs's story enables an original way to understand history and the stories which make up its overshadowed substrate.

A circular movement characterises the dystopian continuum that I have drawn between the two in many ways very different texts and the stories they tell. My analysis does not outline a one-way movement from one to the other, but rather a continuous and productive interplay between the two. Aspects of US slavery have contributed to build up Gilead's world, just as aspects of the latter have foregrounded the gendered nature of oppression that Jacobs voiced. The result is that the reader is invited to reflect on sexual and reproductive slavery as part of the "dystopian" experiences of two women, irrespective of the specific contexts in which such experiences take place. Thus, the physical and ideological violence inflicted on the female body becomes the materialization of dystopian conditions which transcend contingent contextualisation. At the same time, the struggle for resistance and freedom in the two narratives is the manifestation of the utopian impulse that characterises critical dystopias.

Therefore, if the dystopian continuum that links *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Incidents* outlines the modes of exploitation of the female body, we can nevertheless also identify a utopian continuum in the narratives of Offred and Linda. The utopian impulse that fuels their storytelling is among the expressions of hope that any dystopian society seeks to nullify. However, we, the witnessing readers, are called to listen to the two women's tales and give meaning to their hope. Furthermore, after being

addressed by their testimonies, we should be able to recognize the dystopian and utopian undertones of our own reality, thus expanding the continuum. Where is dystopian potential lurking today? What are the consequences to a limitation of women's sexual and reproductive freedom? How does power appropriate the female body in the contemporary? The way we answer these crucial questions determines our understanding of our own society and of our place in it. Ultimately, Atwood and Jacobs tell us that social dreaming, either dystopian or utopian, depends on us and on our desire to be subject, and not object, of social change.

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