

“PHYSICAL PARIAHS” AND “MENTAL DEGENERATES” IN MARGARET
ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* AND *THE TESTAMENTS*: PAST AND
CONTEMPORARY EUGENICS IN GILEAD AND THE U.S.

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Introduction

In September 2020, a whistleblower accused the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Irwin County Detention Center of performing involuntary hysterectomies on asylum-seeking women belonging to ethnic minorities. The whistleblower was a nurse at the facility, and she stated that the women were misinformed about the procedure (Lennard). This caused them to consent to a surgery without knowing its consequences (Lennard). Several media outlets, such as *The Intercept*, hold the Trump administration accountable for re-introducing such practices to U.S. society (Lennard). Specifically, the performance of hysterectomies on unwilling (or unknowing) subjects recalls a time in U.S. history when eugenics and its practices were perceived as science. In short, eugenics is generally known as "the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding" (Davenport, qtd. in Friedlander 4). According to Margaret Atwood, Canadian writer and author of international bestsellers *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *The Testaments* (2019), the conviction that Trump's administration is responsible for reintroducing eugenic practices in U.S. society is not entirely unsubstantiated. During her interview with Twan Huys, Atwood supported this claim by stating that Trump is increasingly behaving like a dictator and throughout history, dictators had the tendency to control people's bodies (Interview, Atwood). Specifically with regards to women "dictators wanted to control women in respect to babies, who shall have the babies, who shall not have the babies, what kinds of babies they shall have [...] very dictatorial" (Atwood). However, Trump did not invent eugenics nor did he personally reintroduce eugenic practices to U.S. society. Rather, Trump appeared to be following a eugenic tradition that was concerned with controlling women's bodies.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Atwood illustrates what such a dictatorial regime could look like in the worst possible scenario. In both novels, the fictional dictatorial regime called 'Gilead' exercises total control over women's bodies, as well as men's bodies to

a certain extent. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* was written in the 1980s, its popularity was revived due to several developments in contemporary U.S. society. For example, In May 2019 the state of Alabama passed the Human Life Protection Act. This act declared that abortions are illegal during any stage of pregnancy, without making exceptions for rape and incest (Blinder & Rojas). In response, women dressed in Handmaid attire demonstrated in front of the State House in Montgomery. Furthermore, several lawsuits were filed, which caused the act to be reconsidered by a District Court judge. The judge ruled against it and declared that such an act “violates Supreme Court precedent and ‘defies’ the Constitution” (Blinder & Rojas).

Image 1: Women in Handmaid attire demonstrating against the Alabama abortion Bill



Source: The Telegraph UK, “The Handmaid’s Tale protests taking place across the world – women,” 15 May 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/handmaids-tale-protests-taking-place-across-world/>

The Handmaid's Tale was published shortly after “the social and political events of the early 1980’s,” in which Ronald Reagan was elected president and a movement called the New Right gained significant influence in the U.S. (Armstrong). Before Reagan, President Jimmy Carter advocated for equal rights between men and women (Mattingly 35). However, when

Reagan defeated Carter during the elections, traditional and conservative cultural norms were reinstated and women had to continue the fight against patriarchal oppression (Leininger 210). Elements in *The Handmaid's Tale* correspond to these social and political developments. Gilead, the fictional Puritan-based dictatorial regime, is a depiction of what could happen to women's bodies if conservative norms and values were incorporated radically in U.S. society. In highly religious Gilead, only men occupy powerful political positions whereas the women are rendered to positions of servitude. Especially political developments of the last five years have made *The Handmaid's Tale* relevant for modern-day audiences, because of striking new parallels between Gilead and Trump's America. Even though Atwood stated that she would not write a sequel to the novel, these developments during Trump's term could have inspired her to eventually do so (Gilbert).

In addition to similarities with contemporary U.S. political developments, Gileadean practices correspond to eugenic practices from the early 19th century till the mid-20th century. In the late 18th century, degeneracy theory became a popular field of research in hereditary science. In short, supporters of disability eugenics believed that disabilities could be passed on to offspring. These disabilities tainted the human evolution and would eventually result in the regression of the human species. Therefore, eugenicists contended that people deemed degenerate should not be allowed to reproduce or even participate in society. As a result, people with disabilities were excluded from their communities and subjected to extensive research and experiments. As will become evident in my thesis, characteristics from disability eugenics are visible in Gilead. For example, babies with severe deformities are not desirable in Gilead and therefore disposed of. These babies are referred to as "Unbabies" or "Shredders", and these names indicate how these babies are dehumanized and, presumably, murdered, because of their disabilities.

Disability eugenics provided the foundation for racial eugenics in the 19th century. Although scholars often contend that racial eugenics started at the beginning of the 20th century, research by Rana Hogarth suggests otherwise. Hogarth suggests that “eugenics is actually a continuation of the views of the slavery era, rather than a separate movement” (Beeferman). Thus, Hogarth’s research indicates that slaves were subjected to eugenic practices in the past, even though they were not yet explicitly theorized as such. Instances of racial eugenics also appear in Gilead.

However, several scholars contend that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* are not intersectional, because they do not explicitly elaborate on the positions of ethnic minorities in Gilead. On the contrary, it appears as if Gilead is only inhabited by white people. Ross and Solinger call this single-issue feminism, in which they define white feminism as focusing on the particular needs of one group. They argue that by focusing on one group, Atwood disregards the intersectional nature of the world we live in, which causes both novels to be colorblind (Fleming 6; 8). However, my thesis will illustrate that both novels are actually more attentive to intersections with both race and disability than appears at first sight. Eugenic practices in Gilead were a reality for black men and women during the Antebellum South. The slave system does not resemble the Handmaid system in Gilead completely, but some resemblances are visible. One such resemblance is concerned with the dismemberment of families. During the Antebellum Era, many slave families were forcibly separated from each other by their owners. Oftentimes, the children were taken from these families and sold to other slaveowners (Pargas 251). Similarly, the child conceived by a Handmaid was separated from her and given to the Commander and his Wife. Another similarity is related to the loss of bodily autonomy, which happened to female slaves and Gileadean Handmaids. When a female slave’s life on the plantation is analyzed in comparison to that of a Handmaid’s in Gilead, it becomes clear that both were subjected to systematic rape by their masters. Furthermore, Handmaids have the

same status as slaves in the sense that they are considered the property of the family they have to conceive children for. Thus, the Handmaid system in Gilead appears to be a form of slavery.

Although the U.S. federal government acknowledged that eugenics is a human rights violation in 1968, traces of eugenic thinking in institutions still affect ethnic minorities (Reilly 364). For instance, when the contemporary U.S. criminal justice system is examined in more detail, it can be argued that eugenic practices still occur in the U.S. This thesis examines how eugenic practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reflect on past eugenic practices from the Antebellum South and current eugenic practices in contemporary U.S. society. I will argue that eugenics has never really been banished from the U.S. Rather, it has developed over time and now operates through the U.S. criminal justice system, as well as through prison rules and regulations. While I will mostly focus on disability and racial eugenics, it is important to note that Gilead is much more about gendered oppression than about race or ability. However, I will illustrate that gender oppression, race and disability interact and intersect with each other.

The theoretical framework supporting the analysis of eugenics in the Antebellum South and contemporary U.S. society will comprise three parts. In the first chapter, I will provide a brief historical overview of degeneracy theory and disability eugenics in the 19th and early 20th century, and I will illustrate how *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reflect on these practices. I will discuss how this form of eugenics was primarily concerned with the general improvement of human beings. I will focus on practices that were used to ensure that the mentally and physically disabled were not able to reproduce, and I will illustrate how both novels reflect on this. In the second chapter, I will discuss how disability eugenics provided the foundation for racial eugenics. Furthermore, I will explain why racial eugenics became especially prevalent in the U.S., as opposed to disability eugenics. In order to illustrate how both novels analyze racial eugenics, I will compare the traditional plantation structure of the Antebellum South to that of Gileadean households in the novels, as well as societal aspects and

legislation. Additionally, I will illustrate that eugenics found its roots in the Antebellum South, and how this can be perceived in both novels. In the final chapter, I will argue that eugenics is still present within U.S. society, and that it is visible through the U.S. criminal justice system and prison rules and regulations. Particularly, I will focus on minority hyper-incarceration and its consequences for reproduction during incarceration, as well as post incarceration.

As primary sources, I will use *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* and close read these to compare Gilead and the different forms of eugenics. Where appropriate I will add examples from *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, because the adaptation closely resembles the original novel. Additionally, I will use scholarly sources concerning the history of eugenics and the societal structure of Antebellum South in order to support these comparisons. Furthermore, I will consult scholarly sources about contemporary incarceration practices and prison rules and regulations, and analyze their effects on minority reproduction in an attempt to illustrate that a new type of eugenics is present in the U.S.. The focus will be on how discriminatory practices are institutionalized in modern-day U.S. society, how they influence the reproductive rights of minorities, and why these can be perceived as eugenic.

Chapter One - Disability Eugenics in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

Before I discuss how *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* utilize eugenic practices from both the past and the present, a brief overview concerning its origins and characteristics is required. Contrary to popular belief, eugenic practices occurred in the U.S. long before its institutionalization in totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany (Lombardo 1). Ideas on biological improvement of the human population date back as far as antiquity, because “‘proto-eugenic’ ideas and practices can be found in ancient Sparta and in the writings of Socrates and Thomas Jefferson [...]” (Rembis 3). Thus, eugenic practices have existed for a long time, but only in the nineteenth and twentieth century was it named and theorized as such.

Davenport defined eugenics as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding” (Davenport, qtd. in Friedlander 4). A more elaborate definition is given by Reilly, who asserts that eugenics is “the thesis that a progressive society may and should act to protect its gene pool, even to the extent of eliminating the reproductive rights of certain individuals [...]” (Reilly 352). Thus, what Reilly argues is that eugenics entailed the willful elimination of the reproductive rights of people who were deemed harmful for human evolution. First, eugenicists deemed people with physical and mental disabilities undesirable. Later, scientists and historians referred to this form of eugenics as disability eugenics. Later, different ethnicities such as Africans and Jews were also added to the group of undesirable people. Eugenicists referred to this variant as racial eugenics. The same development – from disability eugenics to racial eugenics – can be perceived in the Nazi regime and its biopolitics. Wetzell defines Nazi biopolitics as “the complex of ideas, policies, and practices that are concerned with the regulation of bodies, both at the individual level and the collective level of the national population; a complex that, in the case of the Nazi regime, ranged from public health to eugenic, and racial policy [...]” (147). A key component of Nazi biopolitics that was highly influenced by disability eugenics was their sterilization policy, which ensured that those

deemed mentally and physically disabled were deprived of their reproductive rights (Wetzell 150). Later, the sterilization policy was expanded and also included “sub-human races” such as Jews and eastern-European peoples (164). Thus, the Nazi regime based its biopolitics first on disability eugenics, and racial eugenic practices were added later.

The example of Nazi Germany’s sterilization policy ensures that a distinction is discernable between disability motivated eugenics and racially motivated eugenics. It is important to acknowledge that the eugenics movement was primarily concerned with “the improvement of many different ‘races of man’ through the elimination of ‘defective’ humans” (Rembis 2). In other words, eugenicists originally aimed to better the individual for the collective good of society regardless of race. They were primarily concerned with the productivity and overall health of a nation and deemed social problems biologically solvable (3). As the eugenics movement gained global influence, it started to gradually qualify certain ethnicities as inferior, because various mental and physical disabilities were perceived as belonging to those ethnicities. Nancy Stepan argues that “eugenics was characterized by an ethos of cooperation and collaboration among various nation states to improve the overall quality of the human race” (qtd. in Rembis 3). Therefore, disability eugenics should be perceived as consisting of ableist, instead of racist values. Which minorities were deemed inferior differed per culture, which means that the racial component of eugenics was a direct result from cultural differences with respect to race and racial purity (3). In other words, it depended on a culture’s norms and values which groups were subjected to eugenic practices.

1.1 Degeneracy Theory and the Emergence of Disability Eugenics

The scientific support for the existence of biologically and racially inferior bodies was provided by Francis Galton, who researched the inheritance of human mental qualities (Cowan 17). He asserted that these were transferable and could be used to improve the human race by

controlling human breeding patterns “just as if humans were domestic animals [...] and as if behavioural traits were akin to physical characteristics” (16). His research on the heredity of human mental qualities provided support for the “formal exclusion of disabled people from mainstream social life [...]” (Mitchell & Snyder 855), which formed the overarching principle that dictated the disability eugenics doctrine.

However, eugenic ideas had existed for over a century before Galton coined the term eugenics in 1883 (Renwick 359). The scientific foundation of eugenics was primarily biological, because eugenicists were convinced that a distinction could be made between ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ people. ‘Unfit’ referred to people who suffered from a condition that was deemed to be degenerate. In his book *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (2001), Carlson asserts that the earliest influential text on degeneracies appeared in 1710 (12). In this text, it was argued that onanism caused physical and mental maladies in individuals (Carlson 12). Thus, onanism was qualified as a degenerate condition. Soon, other behaviors and “toxic effects of poisons, such as alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, tainted bread, and organic poisons, as well as chronic diseases such as syphilis, tuberculosis, and goiter” were categorized and deemed responsible for the emergence of degenerate conditions (40). Degeneracy theory developed during the 18th and 19th century, and degenerate conditions were divided in two groups: one group was concerned with physical degeneracies, such as deformities and masturbation; the other was comprised of mental degeneracies such as criminal behavior, insanity and retardation (39). The main idea of degeneracy theory was that certain people became mentally and physically corrupted due to damaging behaviors, toxins and chronic diseases. Consequently, people who suffered from such maladies were deemed unfit and unable to effectively participate in society.

In contemporary societies, degeneracy theory and eugenics generally do not withstand empirical scrutiny. However, back in the 19th and 20th century eugenic practices were justified due to several societal problems. One of the problems that provided the foundation for

disability eugenics is described by Thomas Malthus, who was an Oxford-educated English preacher (Reilly 352). He contended in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) that the earth's surface was not limitless, and that the growth of the human population had to be controlled (352). American social-thinker Herbert Spencer, who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" in 1864, blamed the poor for all kinds of societal problems such as economic decline and deterioration of general morale (352). He perceived society as an organic rather than manufactured entity, meaning that society was meant to evolve as if it were an organism (Carlson 231). Spencer claimed that "the quality of society is lowered, morally and intellectually, by the artificial preservation of those who are least able to take care of themselves" (232). In other words, supporting the "unfit" would be detrimental to society's evolution. This belief was further supported by other scholars like Howe, who researched how to best educate the deaf and the blind (Mitchell & Snyder 854; Edwards 144). He and other scholars referred to the unfit as "feeble-minded," "subnormal," "idiots," and "defectives" during the mid - 19th century (Mitchell & Snyder 862). Furthermore, they contended that:

[...] 'idiots' were not only incapable of helping themselves; they also threatened the very fabric of society. Family attention to other 'healthy' children suffered because of the excessive demands of 'idiots' on parental energies. Such an overabundance of attention and upkeep, in turn, upset the country's industrialising labour pool by preventing at least one parent from working. Finally, 'idiots' also proved a menace to communities by exposing 'normal' children to the inappropriate behaviors of those who lacked the capacity to self-censor their own actions (854).

As a response to these societal problems, Howe and others suggested training institutions for the feeble-minded so that they could be educated and return to society to live a life of normalcy

(854). Another scientist whose ideas contributed to the disability eugenics movement was Charles Darwin. He is most famous for his book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), in which he elaborates on the evolution of animals and introduces his theory of natural selection. In short, this theory dictates that those best adapted to their surroundings are more likely to survive (Darwin 61). According to Reilly, “Darwin was cautious in applying his ideas about natural selection to humankind, and did not directly address that topic until he published *The Descent of Man* (1871)” (352). Shortly after the publication of this book, another approach to Darwinism developed in which new social engineering concepts were applied. These were primarily concerned with the science behind the inheritance of characteristics. This new approach to Darwinism became known as Social-Darwinism, and the overarching belief of its supporters was that “selection could be used to rid society of a host of undesirable traits” (Fischer 1096).

Issues such as overpopulation, economic decline and general deterioration of morale did not solely occur on one continent; European as well as North American thinkers wrote about it and provided possible solutions to these problems. Consequently, ideas on the implementation and development of degeneracy theory were shared between America, Canada, and Europe. This caused degeneracy theory to turn into a transatlantic ideology, which we remember nowadays as disability eugenics (Mitchell & Snyder 852). This type of transatlantic scientific discourse is referred to by Mitchell & Snyder as the “Eugenic Atlantic,” which they define as a shared cultural space in which ideas about eugenic science and practices were exchanged “turning disabled persons into pariahs at the population level” (Mitchell & Snyder 846). Within this transatlantic space, maladies such “epilepsy, feeblemindedness, deafness, blindness, congenital impairment, chronic depression, schizophrenia, [and] alcoholism [...]” (845) were soon defined as degenerate conditions. Most of these conditions were perceived as biological deviances by eugenicists. These deviances were defined as belonging to a person’s

in-built inferiority. Additionally, they were perceived as consisting of “those characteristics responsible for the revelation of human variation yet interpreted as unacceptable degrees of deviation” (848). Essentially, a cultural and scientific discourse emerged which attempted to fulfill science’s fantasy of a biologically perfect human by applying eugenics. This resulted in the banishment of biological deviances from “the trans-Atlantic hereditary pool” (845). This scientific endeavor resulted in the creation of a big minority group that consisted of people who were classified as inferior due to their disabilities. Whether their biological deviances could be classified as physical or mental did not matter, because these individuals were all perceived as equally disabled (Mitchell & Snyder 852). This implies that people with physical deformities were deemed inferior without taking their mental capacities into account (Friedlander 170).

Although North America and Europe shared research concerning disability eugenics, both differed in approach. When the transatlantic discourse on disability eugenics continued, two distinct variations of eugenic practices emerged: positive and negative eugenics (Reilly 353). It is important to discuss the differences between these two types, because it helps to understand why the eugenics movement evolved the way it did in the U.S. In short, positive eugenics “hoped to bring about a change through moral suasion – the ablest and the brightest would be educated and urged to have larger families than the average couple” (Carlson 9). In order to stimulate this, programs were developed in which families were educated on how to keep their families fit. Organized contests emerged, such as “Fitter Family Contests,” in which a judge panel decided whose family was the fittest (Reilly 352). This closely resembled farmers’ contests where judges decided which farmer had bred the best livestock (352). On the other hand, negative eugenics “tried to preserve the basic goodness of its people by preventing those deemed unfit from breeding with each other or with essentially decent people” (Carlson 10). Instead of focusing on the “fit” people, negative eugenics turned its attention towards the “unfit” and started excluding several groups from participating in society. Essentially, negative

eugenics created minority groups who were deemed undesirable. Around 1890, positive eugenics was embraced in Great-Britain and other European countries, whereas negative eugenics gained more support in the U.S. around 1877 (Reilly 352). In positive eugenics, the emphasis was primarily on the beneficial consequences that eugenicist doctrines would provide for families, such as an improved morale and higher intelligence among their offspring. Conversely, negative eugenics focused on how society would be damaged by degenerates, solely denoting negative consequences for families if no action were to be taken against them.

Apart from differences in approach, eugenicists from both positive and negative eugenics agreed that mental and physical characteristics were hereditary. Galton provided the scientific support for the disability eugenics discourse between North America and Europe due to his extensive research concerning the heredity of human mental qualities. He argued that mental qualities were not permanent, but rather altered by life experiences which were passed on to offspring (Pernick 43). This type of thinking continued well into the 20th century and added another dimension to eugenics, which “emphasized improving the environment, not simply selectively controlling reproduction” (44). Furthermore, scientists contended that “undesirable hereditary traits could be eliminated from future generations by improving the lives of their parents now, not just by stopping people with bad traits from becoming parents” (44).

Although a distinction can be made between positive and negative eugenics, eugenicists from both sides of the Atlantic did not differ much in their use of eugenic practices. For example, institutions for the feeble-minded emerged in both North America and Europe where they were educated in normalcy, so that they could return to society (Mitchell & Snyder 854). One such institution was “the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Massachusetts” established in 1829 by Howe (854). Although the feeble-minded were forced to go to such institutions, eugenicists disguised this effort as humanitarian and asserted that it was in their best interest

(855). However, the situation inside these institutions was often far from humanitarian, because the feeble-minded were subjected to many experiments. Additionally, eugenicists attempted to persuade young colleagues to work at such institutions by promising them career opportunities in the field of eugenics (855). Thus, a type of disability enterprise emerged in which eugenicists profited of the disabled (855). After conducting many experiments, scientists agreed that it would generally not be beneficial to return all the feeble-minded to their communities, because many of them would not be able to behave normally (855). Whether this was actually true, or whether scientists wanted to keep the disabled in institutions so that their disability research could continue, remains ambiguous.

Another famous disability eugenics practice institutionalized in both North America and Europe, was compulsory sterilization performed on the mentally disabled. As is argued by Mitchell & Snyder, several institutions that harbored “defective citizens” implemented sterilization practices with full support of the federal government in order to “remove defective citizens from participation in the social mainstream” (95). During the 1900s, women who appeared to be suffering from “hysteria” had their ovaries removed, because doctors were convinced it was an ovarian disease (Carlson 201). This finding was supported by Sigmund Freud, who asserted that hysteria was caused by sexual repression (Friedan 98). It is now known that hysteria is not a disease. Rather, it was caused by patriarchal oppression and the ideology of domesticity, which forced women into a lifelong position of servitude to their husbands (140). Consequently, many women became depressed or otherwise unwell. Thus, the patriarchy was responsible for the existence of hysteria. Nevertheless, during the 1900s hysteria was seen as of biological origin. Therefore, women who were perceived as hysterical were categorized as feeble-minded and their ovaries were removed. Doctors sincerely believed that removal of the ovaries could have a therapeutic effect on the patient. Later, sterilization and castration procedures began to be utilized in prisons, because eugenicists believed that many

forms of mental disabilities could be treated with such procedures. Many of these vasectomies were performed on people from ethnic minorities, because they were often accused of committing various crimes (Carlson 210). Therefore, the step from disability to racial eugenics became significantly smaller with the legalization of compulsory sterilization.

Disability eugenics was driven by expert scientists and other elitist groups who contended that a global crisis was at hand. Broadly speaking, this crisis can be identified as a growing concern that the human evolution was halted due to the presence of physically and mentally disabled people. Essentially, disability eugenics was used in Europe and North America as a master trope of human disqualification (859). However, what is often overlooked is the way in which disability eugenics corresponds to racial eugenics. According to Mitchell & Snyder, the step from excluding disabled people to excluding different ethnicities proved to be small, because it was easy to attribute mental and physical disabilities to various ethnicities (850). For example, eugenic scientists contended that the incapacity to assimilate to a different society was a characteristic of Africans, Native Americans, and Jews (850). In combination with their perceived historical barbarity, as well as associations of impurity, eugenic scientists labeled these groups as particularly deviant (850). Carlson argues that these associations with barbarity and impurity caused these groups to become the scapegoats of crimes committed by others (209). Consequently, these ethnic minorities were put into prison and castrated, or sterilized, in the name of science and medicine. This example illustrates that deviant traits came to be seen as biological and inherently belonging to these groups, while these traits were mostly cultural in nature (Mitchell & Snyder 850). Over the course of the years, scientists gradually contended that it was impossible to erase all faulty hereditary traits within ethnic minorities. Therefore, scientists contended that they should be excluded from society altogether, which provided the foundation for racial eugenics. Before this type of eugenics is analyzed, it is interesting to see how practices in Gilead correspond to disability eugenics practices.

1.2 Disability Eugenics in Gilead

First and foremost, supporters of the Gileadean regime are fundamentally obsessed with eugenics, because the regime dubbed reproduction a matter of national urgency. It should be mentioned that negative eugenics is an important principle in Gilead, due to the regime's hyper-focus on the birth of healthy babies. In order to ensure that Handmaids conceive healthy babies, the Gileadean regime micromanages almost every aspect that is concerned with reproduction. This will become apparent in the following analyses.

Several passages from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* illustrate how Gileadean practices correspond to disability eugenics. The most prominent example is related to "Unbabies" or "Shredders". These terms are only mentioned thrice in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it becomes clear that an Unbaby is a severely deformed baby "with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet [...]" (*Handmaid* 172). If the newborn is an Unbaby, Gileadean law dictates that it should be disposed of. The disposal of physically deformed newborns in Gilead can be related to negative disability eugenics, because it appears that Gilead focuses on the elimination of deviant traits, at least concerning newborns. The unwillingness to let deformed babies live corresponds to similar events in the U.S. during the early 20th century. Several reports from Chicago's German-American hospital dictated that Dr. Harry J. Haiselden refused to treat deformed babies despite their parents' wishes (Pernick 3). Moreover, Haiselden dissuaded parents to request a potentially lifesaving treatment for their child, because its handicaps were too severe for treatment (5). A famous example is baby Bollinger, who was born with various deformities, like the absence of a neck (3). Although a medical procedure might have saved the baby's life, the baby would still be physically disabled. Therefore, Haiselden advised against a medical procedure. Furthermore, he "withheld treatment from, or actively speeded the deaths of, at least five more abnormal babies" for three consecutive years after the baby Bollinger scandal (4).

Considering that Gilead has a general disgust for deformities in newborns, it is interesting to note how they do not object to deformities in their Handmaids and Wives. The regime regularly dismembers body parts by means of punishment when a Wife or a Handmaid has been disobedient. For example, Ofwarren, later known as Ofdaniel, has her eye removed because she insulted Aunt Lydia (“Offred”). Other common punitive measures are the dismemberment of hands and fingers as a punishment for reading. For example, Serena Joy loses her finger because she was caught reading the Bible (“The Word”). Additionally, female genital mutilation is used as a punishment, which happens to Ofglen in the series (“Late”). It is interesting to see how the Gileadean regime detests deformities in their newborns, but do not shun from deforming the Wives and Handmaids. The explanation probably lies in the fact that deformities in newborns are natural, whereas the deformities in Handmaids and Wives are artificial.

“Particutions” also appear to be inspired by disability eugenics. The name “particution” is a combination of the words participation and execution’, which indicates that the public participates in the criminal’s death sentence (*Handmaid* 426). An example can be found near the end of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where Offred and her fellow Handmaids are expected to kill a man who is convicted of raping a Handmaid, as well as killing her unborn baby. Although an execution is not eugenic in itself, *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series hint toward an underlying eugenic tradition in this particular scene. Aunt Lydia presents the rapist to the Handmaids, saying that “duty is a hard task mistress, and [that] it is in the name of duty that [they] are here today” (*Handmaid*). Furthermore, she refers to the man as “a disgusting creature” (*Handmaid*). This dehumanizing comment by Aunt Lydia can be perceived as belonging to a eugenic tradition. It appears that all humans who deviate from the Gileadean norms are no longer considered human, like the babies with deformities who are called Unbabies. Apparently people who display socially unacceptable behavior in Gilead are

disgusting creatures, rather than disgusting humans. However, the hint towards a eugenic tradition is found in the next couple of sentence which Aunt Lydia speaks: “Now you know that I do my very best to protect you. The world can be quite an ugly place, but we cannot wish that ugliness away. We cannot hide from that ugliness” (*Handmaid*). These sentences, combined with the sentence that it is the Handmaids’ duty to kill this man, confirm that Gilead believes that ugliness should be disposed of once it has manifested itself in society. This corresponds to the doctrine of negative eugenics, as well as the belief among eugenicists that criminal behavior was a mental disability. These people were deemed undesirable in terms of reproduction, and should therefore be removed from society.

Another example of a eugenic practice can be found in *The Testaments*. This novel is a collection of written accounts from various people who lived in Gilead. One of these accounts is written by Aunt Lydia, who plays a prominent role in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. She elaborates on her experiences in Gilead, and some of these can be linked to disability eugenics. One passage is particularly important, in which Aunt Lydia is in the library of Ardua Hall. On her way to the Forbidden World Literature section, she talks about the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives and that they contain records of “who is related to whom, both officially and in fact [...]” (*Testaments* 35). She argues that the Aunts have to keep these records updated in order to prevent incest and avoid Unbabies (35). This practice in Gilead can be linked to disability eugenics, because the Aunts decide which couples are allowed to marry each other in order to conceive healthy babies. Thus, they decide who are allowed to conceive children, and who are not.

Another reference to disability eugenics can be perceived in a different testament by Aunt Lydia. Aunt Lise mentions to Aunt Lydia that Becka, a Premarital Preparatory student, slashed her wrists during flower-arranging lessons, because she does not wish to be a Wife (166; 212). Early in *The Testaments*, the reader learns that Becka was always reluctant to

become a Wife. Once, she burst into tears over the story of the concubine who was raped and killed because she tried to run away from her husband (79). After hearing that story, she vowed that she would never become a Wife (80). Instead she desires to become an Aunt, because Aunts were not supposed to perform the sexual duties of Wives (10). Becka slashes her wrists in order to attract the Aunts' attention. By doing so, Becka presents herself to the Aunts as mentally unstable. However, it is unlikely that Becka is actually mentally unstable, because she vowed as a young girl that she would never become a Wife. Nevertheless, the Aunts have to assess whether Becka is capable of safely fulfilling her duties as a Wife. Important here is the term safely. Becka is supposed to be a Wife, meaning that she is supposed to marry a Commander, tend to the household and conceive a child. If the Aunts consider Becka as mentally unstable, then she is not fit enough to become a Wife. Apart from potentially endangering her husband and the household personnel, she might also pose a danger for her child once it's born. Eventually, Aunt Lydia contends that Becka should become an Aunt (217). Essentially, Becka is removed from society because she is deemed unfit for participation as a Wife in Gilead. More importantly, she is deemed unfit for reproduction. This corresponds to negative eugenics, where the unfit are removed from society because they are perceived as undesirable.

Another instance of someone being diagnosed as unfit among women in Gilead, appears in the episode where Ofdaniel threatens to jump off a bridge with her baby. According to Gileadean law, her baby belongs to Commander Putnam and his Wife, who stand on the bridge trying to convince her to come down. Aside from the monthly sex rituals, Ofdaniel had an affair with Commander Putnam which is strictly against Gileadean rules. While standing on the bridge, Ofdaniel yells at Putnam "You said we would be a family!" to which his response was "she's not well" ("The Bridge"). By saying that Ofdaniel is not well, Commander Putnam portrays her as mentally unstable even though she is not. Rather, she is so desperate to keep

her baby that she wants to keep her forever by throwing themselves off the bridge. Thus, Gilead is responsible for Ofdaniel's desperation and not some biological defect. Aunt Lydia asks Offred to convince Ofdaniel to step off the ledge. While Offred succeeds in retrieving the baby, Ofdaniel turns back and throws herself off the bridge. As becomes apparent in a later episode, Ofdaniel survived the fall and is sentenced to death by stoning for endangering her child due to her "mental instability" ("Night"). Again, this is an example of disability eugenics because Ofdaniel is declared mentally unstable. Although still capable of having children, her perceived mental instability poses a danger to Gilead and its inhabitants. When all Handmaids refuse to stone her, Ofdaniel is deported to the Colonies and the other Handmaids have their wrists burned as a punishment for not obeying.

In the novel, Offred soon discovers that the Colonies is a collective name for locations where primarily "Unwomen" live (*Handmaid* 14). Unwomen have the lowest status in Gilead, and consist of women who are unable to socially integrate in Gilead's gender division system. The novels do not explicitly state when women were seen as Unwomen. The most evident example in *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred's mother, who was a feminist and women's rights activist before the Gileadean takeover (184; 185). Later, when Offred has found Moira in a brothel called Jezebels, Moira mentions that she saw Offred's mother working on a wasteland in a movie about the Colonies (390). More examples can be found in the television series. For example, Mrs. O'Conner was a Wife who fell in love with another man and had sex with him. Afterwards, she was sent to the Colonies for being an adulteress ("Unwomen"). Another Unwoman is Sally, a Jewish rabbi who refused to exchange her Jewish religion for Puritanism ("Seeds"). Consequently, she was sent to the Colonies. Later, her friend Moira tells her that a small percentage of "Gender Traitors" live there as well, and that not all of them are hanged from the Wall (386). Gender Traitors are gays and lesbians. In the Colonies, Unwomen and Gender Traitors have to clean up bodies after a battle, work with toxic waste and other

chemicals which ensures that they die early (385). Thus, they are the deviants of Gilead and are assigned to jobs that nobody wants to do due to high mortality risks. This is another example of negative disability eugenics in Gilead. They are the minority group of Gilead, which is something that disability eugenics also creates by distinguishing between fit and unfit people.

These examples of disability eugenics in Gilead are the most conspicuous. The aim of this chapter was to illustrate how the eugenics movement attempted to improve national health by removing people from society who were perceived by eugenicists as disabled. Furthermore, this chapter served to illustrate how Gileadean practices reflect on disability eugenics. However, these novels do not solely reflect on this type. As was briefly mentioned, Mitchell & Snyder contended that the step from disability eugenics to racial eugenics was small, because undesirable biological deviances were increasingly attributed to other ethnicities (850). This caused the emergence of racial eugenics, which became especially popular in the U.S. In the next chapter, I will illustrate how racial eugenics differed from its disability variety and discuss how the U.S. government utilized racial eugenic practices. I will argue that racial eugenics was present in the U.S. during the institution of slavery, which took the form of experiments on black slaves and pathologizing their bodies. Lastly, I will argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reflect on racial eugenics, even though the novels do not elaborate on ethnicity and racial politics. Rather, I will argue that the novels can be perceived as partially intersectional, because they reflect on the institution of slavery and its implementation of racial eugenics.

Chapter 2 –Slavery, Racial Eugenics, and Gilead

In order to understand the relationship between racial eugenics and Gilead, it is first necessary to provide a brief historical overview of the development and characteristics of racial eugenics in the U.S. The foundation for racial eugenics was provided when undesirable deviances were ascribed as inherently belonging to different ethnicities (Mitchell & Snyder 850). In addition to disabilities, types of skin color and nationalities gradually started to belong to hereditary traits that were deemed undesirable (851). Racial eugenics was popular in the U.S., which can be perceived through the number of laws based on discriminatory biases (Reilly 353). Although racial eugenics was perceived as a new science in the twentieth century, research by Hogarth suggests that racial eugenic practices were already present in the Antebellum South. She asserts that racial eugenics owes much of its methodology to medical practices from doctors who worked with slaves, and she is convinced that “eugenics is actually a continuation of the views of the slavery era, rather than a separate movement” (Beeferman). I will use Hogarth’s argument that the treatment of enslaved black women was essentially eugenic, and I will argue that Atwood’s focus on eugenicism in Gilead implicitly draws attention to eugenicism in the Antebellum South. Consequently, the claim that Gilead reflects on the U.S.’s eugenic past gains more credibility, because some racial eugenic practices performed in the Antebellum South correspond to eugenic practices in Gilead.

2.1. Racial Eugenics: Adaptation and Development in The United States

Institutionalization of racial eugenic practices in the U.S. was possible due to the “historical system of control that created a racial hierarchy [which] allowed for the mistreatment of Black bodies” (qtd. in Hamilton & Roy 100). Discriminatory laws and regulations directed at ethnic minorities were justified using findings of racial eugenic research, because racial eugenics was seen as a science in the twentieth century (Renwick 362). These discriminatory laws can be

divided in two categories: laws that prohibited the immigration of undesirable people to the U.S., and laws that limited the rights of ethnic minorities who already lived in the U.S.

The first set of laws inspired by racial eugenics had the following principle as their foundation: “[...] to sharply limit the immigration of certain people into the United States” (Reilly 353). An example is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1877, which “was the first [law] to differentiate by national origin and began a long history of racially motivated immigration restrictions [...]” and “it was also the first law to impose restrictions on the basis of skill, [...]” (Chen 299). More restrictive immigration laws on the basis of skill, health, and intellect were added shortly after the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1903 “Congress passed legislation prohibiting ‘epileptics’ from entering the country [...] and in 1907 it banned ‘imbeciles’ and the ‘feeble-minded’ as well” (Rembis 7). The Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 was heavily influenced by racial eugenics. This Act was based on a system of quotas, “which were to be allotted to countries in the same proportion that the American people traced their origins to those countries, through immigration or the immigration of their forebearers” (67). For example, it dictated that a larger percentage of people from northern and western Europe were allowed to immigrate to the U.S., as opposed to people from southern and eastern Europe (Ngai 67).

Each person who desired to immigrate to the U.S. had to take an intelligence test, which was popularized by Goddard in 1910 (Tucker 163). This test used a new method to measure someone’s intellect and the scores of immigrants were linked to different categories, of which some were “idiot” and “feeble-minded” (163). These tests appeared to be made in such a way that most of the undesirable ethnicities seemed feeble-minded. For example, the results claimed that “83% of the Jews, 80% of the Hungarians, 79% of the Italians, and 87% of the Russians were ‘feeble-minded’” (Kamin, qtd in Tucker 163). The ethnicities who scored low on these intelligence tests were perceived as unwanted immigrants, and provided the U.S. with

justifications as to why they were not allowed to enter the country. The results from the intelligence tests confirmed the racial biases of many Americans, one of which is the belief that northern- and western Europeans “shared a common whiteness that made them distinct from those who were deemed to not be white” (70). Sociologists from the Chicago School of Sociology supported this belief. The Chicago School of Sociology emerged in the early twentieth century, and consisted of faculty members and graduate students from the University of Chicago, who developed new sociological theories and methods in order to create a science out of society (Cavan 411). They argued that “the history of immigration to the United States is the story of one-way western European immigration and assimilation -, in short, the ‘making’ of Americans” (Goodman 7). Therefore, it followed from a eugenicist’s point of view that these people would contribute positively to the progression of the American people, because they shared the same heritage.

Kraut identifies other beliefs which were used to legitimize these discriminatory laws. He emphasizes that many Americans were intolerant towards non-western European immigrants, because it was generally believed that they carried diseases which would harm the U.S. economy and society (Kraut 53). For example, these immigrants were blamed for the influenza outbreak of 1918, even though their numbers had severely dropped during wartime travel disruptions (55). Apart from health issues, many Americans also feared that these immigrants would not be able to adapt to U.S. culture, which would result in the crippling of U.S. norms and values (53). Although these reasons seem unjustifiable nowadays, they were supported by various scientists, social thinkers and other scholars who supported racial eugenics in the early twentieth century.

Racial eugenics also ensured the emergence of domestic laws that limited the rights of ethnic minorities who already lived in the U.S. An example was the legalization of compulsory sterilization. Forced sterilization occurred in the U.S. long before its national usage in the early

twentieth century. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, sterilization was performed on people of whom scientists contended that their disabilities originated from their reproductive organs. Later, sterilization was used as a punishment directed at criminals who mostly belonged to ethnic minorities. According to Amy and Rowlands, “the Kansas Territorial Legislature [of 1855] legalized the castration of black or mulatto men convicted of rape, attempted rape or kidnapping of a white woman” (123). Racial eugenics is present in this law, because there is no mention of compulsory sterilization for white men who committed such crimes. Furthermore, one of the criteria is that it has to concern a white woman in particular. It is remarkable that no consequences are stated when such an act is committed against a woman from an ethnic minority group.

In 1907 Indiana was the first state to legalize the involuntary sterilization of sex offenders, and their law relied on the theory that “mental illnesses were genetically transmitted and that society would be better off if individuals affected did not reproduce” (123). These laws enabled the establishment of many compulsory sterilization programs in prisons, which were often “endorsed by high-ranking personalities and authoritative scientific journals and newspapers” (124). Although compulsory sterilization was often presented as a criminal punishment, it is an important example of racial eugenics which aimed at the reduction of offspring from different ethnicities (121). Eugenicists perceived the sterilization of criminals from ethnic minority groups as a successful tool in achieving this goal.

Although governments from different states drafted foreign and domestic laws influenced by racial eugenics, the U.S. still claimed to be a nation of immigrants. This would imply that they objected against racially motivated laws and were friendly towards all immigrants (Goodman 7). As becomes evident, a paradox is at the heart of U.S. immigration policies and racial eugenic practices. Although the U.S. claimed to accept immigrants from all countries, most non-western European immigrants returned to their native countries. Some felt

threatened by the prospect of becoming victimized by racial eugenics, while others were sent home by the federal government because their working visas had expired (9). The federal government did allow a certain number of these immigrants to stay and work in the country for some time, because cheap laborers were needed to stimulate and support the U.S. economy (Lim & Marinari 51). This practice discouraged many non-western European immigrants to build a life in the U.S., and the U.S. still acquired cheap laborers without risking that they would stay permanently. This practice supported racial eugenics, because these immigrants would not stay permanently and thus, would not “taint” the American people. These laws and practices influenced by racial eugenics increased racial inequality, and illustrates that the scientific status of eugenics was used to justify discrimination in the US.

2.2. Gilead and the Antebellum South (c. 1783 – c. 1861)

Gilead can be compared to the Antebellum South in many ways, but a good starting point is a comparison between the average structure of Gileadean households and traditional slave plantations in the U.S. There were many plantations during the Antebellum South, and these were traditionally governed by the plantation owner and his wife (Burke 17). The plantation owner was usually a white man, who was “the head of all dependents, including wives, children, and slaves, who lived within their household and represented their interests to the outside world” (55). Whereas the husband was responsible for conducting business with other plantation owners and slave traders outside the home, the wife managed life inside by controlling the housekeepers and raising the children (18). The plantation owner’s power derived from his control over the slaves, but the foundation of his power is best understood from a religious point of view. It was believed by most southern slaveholders that “white men’s mastery was grounded in a God-given order, in which all individuals played important roles

yet knew their appropriate social places” (55). This belief in white man’s divinity indicated that U.S. society during the Antebellum era was highly religious.

These characteristics from a traditional slavery household offer resemblances to that of a Gileadean household. In Gilead, the household always consisted of a Commander, his Wife, several Marthas, and a Handmaid. The Commander is the head of the household, although he does not meddle with household affairs. Rather, the Commanders are in charge of ruling Gilead, whereas their Wives are in charge of the household. Martha’s resemble house slaves, because they have to do chores like cleaning and cooking. Additionally, Gilead is highly religious. Similar to the southern plantation owners, the Commanders are believed to possess a God-given superiority over their Wives and dependents.

In addition to household structures, it is also worth analyzing the ways in which plantation owners treated their slaves, and how Handmaids were treated by their Gileadean superiors. Slaves and Handmaids share several similarities concerning their status, one of which is that they were both perceived as livestock. During the Antebellum era, the overarching principle was the “chattel principle” (Davis 193). This principle dictated that slaves had the same status as farm animals and were perceived as property, which meant that they had no rights. The societal consequences of this principle extends beyond its definition. In order to better illustrate these consequences, an explanation of the chattel principle is provided by former fugitive slave James W.C. Pennington:

The being of slavery, its soul and its body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle; the cart-whip, starvation, and nakedness, are its inevitable consequences... You cannot constitute slavery without the chattel principle—and with the chattel principle you cannot save it from these results. Talk

not about kind and Christian masters. They are not masters of the system. The system is master of them (qtd. in Davis 193).

This passage illustrates that the chattel principle controlled the slave masters and the way they treated their slaves. In order to maintain the slave system, masters had to treat slaves as property and not view them as human beings. Furthermore, the principle implies that slave owners had to adhere to rules which were established by the chattel principle. Pennington emphasized that if they would fail to do so, they would suffer reprisal from other slaveowners.

The chattel principle occurs in Gilead in a variety of ways. Like slaves, Handmaids are the property of their Commanders, which is signified in Handmaids' names. For example, the protagonist of the novel is the property of Commander Fred Waterford and she is called Offred. Other Handmaids have similar names, such as Ofwarren and Ofglen, indicating that all Handmaids were perceived as property just like slaves during the Antebellum era. Additionally, Handmaids' names changed when they were given to another family. A good example is Janine, who is first known as Ofwarren and later becomes Ofdaniel, because she is given from Commander Warren Putnam to Commander Daniel Monroe ("The Bridge").

Another comparison with the Antebellum South and Gilead emerges when rebellious sentiments among slaves and Handmaids are analyzed. Many slaves were rebellious, albeit silently. Haas refers to this silent rebellion as "resistant accommodation" (ii), meaning that slaves "outwardly conformed to the demands of their enslavers while covertly circumventing those demands to further their own interests" (Haas ii). Consequently, a resistance community grew through mutual trust, networking, and shared experiences, that "developed among the enslaved when they were able to exploit gaps in the surveillance of their enslavers" (ii). In Gilead, a similar form of resistant accommodation is visible when Offred finds a quote in her room which reads: "nolite te bastarides carborundorum" (*Handmaid* 82). Translated, it means "don't let the bastards grind you down" (290). Later, Offred finds out that a resistance

movement called “Mayday” operates in Gilead. Ofglen, Offred’s partner during walks, asks Offred a blasphemous question which is followed up by an invitation to join Mayday. When they stand in front of the shop window of a store that mechanically produces copies of the Bible, Ofglen asks Offred if she believes that God listens to these machines (258). Judging by Offred’s answer, she then mentions that Offred can join them if she desires to (260). Here, Ofglen hints to the existence of a resistance movement operating in Gilead.

Furthermore, Haas’s notion of resistant accommodation occurs in Gilead through the Handmaids’ shopping trips. Handmaids are not supposed to talk to each other during these trips, but they whisper news to each other from behind their winged hats (41; 42). Also, they can choose to take the long route back to their homes. During those walks, they sometimes have enough privacy to freely talk to each other without a Guardian or Eye noticing them (308; 309). Lastly, some Handmaids further their own interests by letting themselves get impregnated by the unnamed doctor in Gilead. When Offred visits him for a regular check-up, he offers to impregnate her and mentions that “most of these old guys can’t make it anymore, [...] or they’re sterile” (95). Offred admits to him that she wants a baby, because it is clear to her that she needs to bear children, or else she will be killed (95). The doctor says that lots of women do it, and it becomes clear why. Offred mentions that she will probably die if she does not bear children, which is what other Handmaids know as well. Thus, they let the doctor impregnate them. An additional benefit of being pregnant in Gilead is that these women receive the so-called “velvet treatment”, meaning that they get lots to eat and are well taken care of in order to conceive a healthy baby (42). In this respect, letting the doctor impregnate them is a way for the Handmaids to further their own interests. Although these women still become pregnant and carry a baby for the Commander and his Wife, it is still a form of resistant accommodation because they did not get pregnant according to Gileadean rules. Furthermore, they do it to save themselves and also receive a better treatment for about nine months. However, Offred does

not accept the doctor's offer. Instead, she starts an affair with Nick, the male servant of the Waterford residence (410; 411). She eventually gets pregnant with his baby, but she also increasingly experiences satisfaction and joy out of their affair, which are both forbidden.

Various comparisons can be made between the Antebellum South and Gilead on micro-level, and resemblances on national level are also visible when laws and abolitionist movements are taken into account. One such law is the Fugitive Slave Act (1850). This act dictated that citizens from northern U.S. states were not allowed to shelter escaped slaves from the South. Instead, they had to aid the slave catchers in returning runaway slaves to their rightful owners (Lepore 261). However, resistance movements like the Underground Railroad (UGRR) operated in the South regardless of the Fugitive Slave Act. Interestingly, a similar abolitionist organization exists in Gilead as well. One comparison can be made with Mayday, who are referred to as "an underground espionage ring [...] smuggling precious resources over the border into Canada" (129). These precious resources are Handmaids, and Offred later learns that this underground passage is referred to as the Underground Femaleroad (382). This is clearly a reference to the UGRR in the Antebellum South, which was used to bring runaway slaves to safety (Blackett 2). Additionally, Offred mentions that she would like to sing "Amazing Grace," but that such songs of freedom are not allowed to be sung in public anymore, because Gilead considers them to be dangerous (85). This also hints to abolitionist sentiments from the Antebellum South, because Amazing Grace was written as a protest against slave trade (Turner V).

Additionally, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* correspond to an abolitionist work called *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). This autobiography recounts the story of former slave Frederick Douglass, who managed to escape from the slave states. Similarly, Offred managed to escape from Gilead, which in essence uses a slave system as well. This becomes apparent in the epilogue of the novel, where the historical notes are

discussed. These fictional historical notes are tapes that Offred recorded, in which she speaks of her life in Gilead. Additionally, historical notes can be found in *The Testaments*, where the written accounts from the characters are discussed by the same professor who discusses Offred's tapes in *The Handmaid's Tale*. These tapes and documents form another resemblance to Douglass's narrative and other slave narratives, because they are autobiographies, albeit fictitious. Furthermore, Douglass recounts that he was moved to different plantations several times and each time he moved his name changed (Douglass xxxiii). Similarly, a Handmaid's name changed when she was moved to another family after having conceived a child for the former.

Although Atwood did not indicate that she meant for Gilead to offer resemblances with the Antebellum South, many can be perceived. Thus, it can be argued that both novels are intersectional to some extent. Consequently, the claim can be made that they also comment on eugenic practices during the Antebellum era, even though these practices were not yet recognized as such, and the term had not yet been coined. In the next subsection, key slavery practices in which racial eugenics finds its roots will be analyzed.

2.3 Gilead, Racial Eugenics, and its Roots in Slavery

Research conducted by Rana Hogarth supports the idea offered in the first chapter, which is that the step from disability eugenics towards racial eugenics proved to be small. It can be deduced from her research that this step was taken fast. In her book *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780 – 1840* (2017), Hogarth contends that the attribution of medical conditions to specific races began to gain widespread influence around the 1780s. She focuses on the medical treatment of African-American slaves in the Antebellum South, and how these medical practices were used to ascribe racial characteristics to black slaves. Of particular interest to both medical practitioners and slave owners were “the

ways that black people's bodies labored, thrived, and experienced sickness" (Hogarth xii). This interest was guided by the belief that "black people's bodies were innately different from white people's bodies" (8). If physicians could find out what influenced the health of African-American slaves, they could pass this knowledge on to slaveowners who sought to "master the health of their labor force to ensure productivity" (xiii). In other words, slaveowners and physicians sought to biologically improve black slaves' bodies in order to increase the productivity of the plantation's workforce and maximize its profits (9).

One physician who pathologized the black body was Dr. Cartwright, who contended that certain behaviors from black slaves had to be seen as diseases. Examples of these supposed diseases were "drapetomania – the disease that caused slaves to run away; rascality – the disease that made slaves commit petty offenses; and dysaesthesia ethiopica – which made slaves "insensible and indifferent to punishment" (Willoughby 579). Obviously, these were not diseases. Slaves did not run away from plantations because they were ill, but because they wanted to escape slavery. However, by dubbing these behaviors as diseases, medical practitioners increased white authority over slaves. Additionally, the doctors contended that only white physicians could cure slaves of these supposed diseases, because they believed that the slaves were too dumb to do this themselves (Hogarth 83). Another example of such a fake disease was Cachexia Africana, also known as "chronic dirt-eating" (81). Physicians agreed that this disease only occurred among black slaves, and required immediate white intervention to stop its spread once it emerged (81). However, these physicians deliberately neglected that dirt-eating did not solely occur during the Antebellum era. Hogarth argues that chronic dirt-eating occurred in many historical contexts "as a religious and medicinal ritual throughout Europe and Africa, as a physiological response to mineral deficiency in peasant populations and pregnant women [...]" (82). Nevertheless, white medical practitioners contended that this

disease required white intervention, and categorized it as a pathological peculiarity of black bodies (83).

Physicians in the Antebellum South used their medical knowledge to enhance their control, and that of the slaveowners, over black slaves. In their attempts to ascribe racially influenced pathologies to black bodies, a newfound interest emerged in how black slaves could be spared from these diseases in the future. Proof of this interest can be found when the works and accomplishments of Dr. Sims are analyzed. Dr. Sims performed countless surgeries on black women's vaginas in an attempt to improve their uteruses for better future offspring (Sublette & Sublette 54). Furthermore, so-called "slave medicine," of which it was argued that it could cure diseases like drapetomania and Cachexia Africana, became increasingly popular (54; 55).

An important development caused by this new interest is that of the slave-breeding industry. Historians often debate whether "slave owners deliberately interfered with the reproductive lives of their slaves in the hope of increasing the number of slave births, thereby expanding their profits by selling surplus slaves or exploiting additional labourers and increasing crop production" (Smithers 551). According to most abolitionists, slave-breeding occurred on so-called "stud farms", although this is contested by scholars like Tadman, who maintains that the idea of stud farms in abolitionists' discourse resembles that of a trope and lacks credibility (Smithers 553). Instead, most of the infant slaves were the product of cross-plantation marriages and other intimate relationships between the enslaved, and slaves and their masters (West & Shearer 1018). Oftentimes, enslaved women were persuaded to conceive children because they were told that their children would be valuable (1018). However, valuable here meant valuable to the slave owner, which was not mentioned to the enslaved women. Many instances of these types of intercourse were not voluntary. According to Smithers, the slave-breeding discourse of the antebellum south was riddled with "the sustained

sexual abuse of slave women and the callous destruction of slave families under southern ‘paternalism’” (552). Although slaveowners kept emphasizing that conceiving and raising children was imperative to the slaves’ mental health, slave-breeding was critical for the national growth of slavery (Smithers 554). An additional benefit was that breeding slaves was cheaper than buying them from slave traders.

In addition to the financial benefits of slave-breeding, the interest in enhancing a plantation’s labor force gave the practice of slave-breeding a eugenic dimension, although it was not formally referred to as such. This early type of eugenics does not resemble racial eugenics, because racial eugenics was focused on improving the national stock by ensuring that people from different ethnicities were not able to procreate (qtd. in Friedlander 4). The type of eugenics that can be perceived in the Antebellum South is also racial, but with a different objective. This appears to be paradoxical since slaves did not possess the status of human beings, but were perceived as property (Davis 193). If this were racial eugenics as it was utilized in the first half of the twentieth century in America, slaves would be ousted from society because they were harmful for the development of humanity. However, black slaves were extremely valuable for the economy in the Antebellum South (Sublette & Sublette 18). Slave states were economically successful, and this success was attributed to the hard labor of black slaves (48). In order to maintain this success, the need for more and improved slaves emerged. Many plantations were plagued by the fake slave diseases, which injured the economy. Thus, the need for slaves who were less vulnerable to these supposed diseases emerged. Since such a form of breeding primarily occurred among slaves, one can speak of a different form of racial eugenics in the Antebellum South.

This form of racial eugenics offers a comparison to practices from *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*. Like slaves, Handmaids possessed the lowest status of all groups in Gilead. However, the Handmaids offer an eerie resemblance with black slaves concerning

slave-breeding practices. Like female slaves, Handmaids were considered invaluable for the existence and growth of Gilead. Healthy babies in Gilead were considered invaluable, just like healthy slave babies were valuable to slaveowners. After conceiving, a Handmaid's baby was immediately given to the Commander and his Wife. Likewise, the children of female slaves were sold to other slaveowners. Thus, Handmaids and female slaves correspond to each other concerning slave breeding discourse, and their babies were also perceived as profitable in both societies, albeit the type of profits differ from each other. Furthermore, abolitionists contended that slave-breeding occurred on stud farms. Although this view is contested by some scholars, the Gileadean household seems to closely resemble a stud farm. Abolitionists believed that on these farms the systematic rape of female slaves occurred, so that they would conceive healthy, profitable babies. The same thing occurs in Gilead, since it is often mentioned in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* that Handmaids did not participate in the monthly sex ritual voluntarily (*Handmaid* 148). Thus, Handmaids were also subjected to systematic rape by their superiors.

Out of the pathologizing black slaves' bodies, a scientific movement emerged in which physicians attempted to cure black slaves from slave diseases and improve them simultaneously. Slaves who did not suffer from these supposed diseases were paired with each other in order to procreate and create slave children who would grow up to be stronger and more hard-working than their parents. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the reader discovers that a similar form of matchmaking is present in Gilead. The Aunts used the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives in order to determine which couples should marry and procreate in order to improve the chances of a healthy baby. They also assigned Handmaids to families on the basis of such archives to ensure that Handmaids would produce healthy babies for these families.

In addition to the previous examples, another comparison between Gilead and the Antebellum South can be made based on religious beliefs. Pro-slavery advocates' belief that African people were destined to serve white men was based on a Biblical curse (Pulis 79). They referred to Africans as "The Children of Ham". Ham was the ruler of Canaan and a son of Noah. Ham wronged Noah by planting a vineyard and getting drunk, so Noah cursed Canaan and dictated that its people had to live a life of servitude to God (Prickett & Carroll 10). In Gilead, a similar belief is held towards people of color. While Offred watches tv, an anchorman proudly states that the "resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule" (*Handmaid* 129). This is a hint towards a connection between Gilead and the Antebellum South. Simultaneously, it hints to racial segregation and affirms the belief that only white people live in Gilead while other ethnicities are resettled. Offred mentions that nobody exactly knows what ethnic minorities have to do there, but it is likely that they have to work on a farm (129). The resettlement of ethnic minorities in Gilead provides a connection to racial eugenics. Based on this biblical belief, the Gileadean regime deems ethnic minorities as undesirable inhabitants of Gilead. Therefore, they are transported to other areas so that Gilead will stay completely white. Additionally, the theory that these people then have to work on a farm provides a connection to black slaves who worked on plantations in the Antebellum South.

Another example from *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates that people with different religious convictions were prosecuted in Gilead. In the same news report, the anchorman mentions that "five members of the heretical sect of Quakers have been arrested" (129). This is a hint to the Antebellum South, as well as eugenic practices in Gilead. During the Antebellum era, religious groups like the Quakers believed that slavery was a sin and they were famous for helping fugitive slaves escape the slave states. This is demonstrated by a scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where several slave catchers discuss where the runaway slave could be and they contend that she must be in the Quaker settlement (Stowe 255). Additionally, the first Abolition Society

was founded by Quakers in Philadelphia (12). Logically, pro-slavery advocates nor pro-Gileadeans were fond of the Quakers. The anchorman talks about the Quakers and Children of Ham in the same news report, so it is likely that the Quakers were arrested for aiding ethnic minorities in their escape from Gilead. The Quakers are perceived by Gilead as heretics, because they do not share the same beliefs. What happens to the Quakers remains ambiguous, but it is likely that they were either executed or deported to the Colonies. Either way, this is another demonstration of eugenic practices present in Gilead.

Gilead and the Antebellum South are comparable in several ways. Even though many scholars argue that the novels are not intersectional, a case can be made that they reflect on the Antebellum era, as well as early racial eugenic practices that occurred during this period. Arguably, racial eugenics is a continuation of medical- and breeding practices from the slavery era which inspired the eugenics movement. Moreover, it appears that both novels seem to recognize these practices in the Antebellum South. Whether Atwood chose to deliberately allude to these practices in her novels is unknown, but it is evident that one can read the novel in this way and base this reading on sufficient evidence. Additionally, the argument that both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are partially intersectional is strengthened, because practices that occur in Gilead also occurred in the Antebellum South. Furthermore, the claim that the novels reflect on America's eugenic past increases in credibility, because many aspects of Gileadean society incorporate elements from racial eugenics. They even refer to a time in which the U.S. already practiced an early form of racial eugenics.

Chapter 3 – Cultural Eugenics in Contemporary U.S. Society and Gilead

After World War II, countries globally contended that eugenics was a human rights violation and eugenic practices gradually became prohibited (Reilly 364). The original idea behind eugenics was a noble one, because it “promised to equip humanity with the tools to shape its own evolution, thereby enhancing well-being and eradicating illness, crime, poverty, and vice” (Oleson 2). However, eugenics always created one unsolvable problem. By putting its theory into practice, eugenics created minority groups consisting of people who were deemed unworthy of procreation. Thus, the science established a hierarchy within society and increased inequality, oppression, and discrimination. World War II and Nazi biopolitics demonstrated that this fundamental eugenics problem has the ability to grow into a powerful weapon, of which genocides and eradication of minorities are the most notable. Additionally, it was ethically unacceptable that one group of experts decided who was allowed to reproduce and who was not. Such decisions were often subjective, based on what the experts deemed to be desirable traits. Obviously, this increased discrimination and racism, and deprived an individual of the constitutional right to procreate (Rosenberg 1). Due to these reasons, the eugenics principle was globally deemed unethical and an impediment to the protection of minority individuals from the dominant majority.

However, racism and inequality between ethnicities in society can still have eugenic implications. Racism and inequality are still present in almost every nation, especially in the U.S. As is argued by Alexander, “the arguments and rationalizations that have been trotted out in support of racial exclusion and discrimination in its various forms have changed and evolved, but the outcome has remained largely the same” (1). For example, after the abolition of slavery “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” when the Jim Crow laws were drafted in the Reconstruction era (Du Bois 55; Alexander 32). The Jim Crow laws legalized many forms of racial segregation based on the idea that

“segregation in school, church and society is in the interest of racial integrity, and racial progress” (qtd. in Schmidt 447). These laws were heavily influenced by negative eugenics, since negative eugenics sought to reduce the procreation of “unfit” people. Interestingly, the end of Jim Crow occurred almost simultaneously with the official end of eugenic practices in the U.S in 1968 (Reilly 364). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 revoked various legal discriminatory barriers and “mandated federal review of all new voting regulations so that it would be possible to determine whether their use would perpetuate voting discrimination” (Alexander 38).

When U.S. prison populations were analyzed in 2014, it became apparent that “black females were imprisoned at twice the rate of white females [and] black males were imprisoned at nearly six times the rate of white males” (Oleson 9). Furthermore, “in 2014, one in every 36 adults was under the authority of the criminal justice system: in jail, prison, on probation or parole” (8). In addition, there is still no equality between people from different socioeconomic classes. For example, the number of incarcerated poor white people is higher than the number of incarcerated rich white people (Western & Muller 166). Thus, it appears that ethnic minorities and poor white people are excessively targeted with respect to crime. Incarceration has grave consequences for the well-being of incarcerated individuals and their families. It is particularly worth analyzing the consequences for minority reproduction rates, since many states have strict rules concerning procreation from prison. Additionally, research has pointed out that incarceration could contribute to a decreased sense of one’s personal identity, which is intrinsically connected to one’s cultural identity. This appears to be especially true for children of incarcerated parents who end up in foster care, because they are often raised by people from different backgrounds and could become disconnected from their native cultural heritage.

The question arises whether a new form of eugenics is present in the U.S. I will argue that a type of hybrid eugenics exists in the U.S., because it incorporates elements from

disability and racial eugenics. Henceforth, I will refer to this type of eugenics as class-cultural eugenics in my thesis. Central in class-cultural eugenics are the exclusion of various ethnicities, and the exclusion of people from lower socioeconomic classes. In order to support my argument, I will illustrate the effects of incarceration on minority groups and their overall reproduction rates by analyzing the two side-effects of minority incarceration and forced parent-child separation. Firstly, I will argue that incarcerated people are often incapable of maintaining a close relationship with their families, especially their children. I will illustrate that prison rules and regulations reduce minorities' chances of reproducing, and that this can be understood as eugenic. Finally, I will illustrate how *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reflect on the negative effects of both minority incarceration and forced parent-child separation.

3.1 Prisons: Modern Eugenicist Institutions in the U.S.

The U.S. is an incarceration nation, but the number of incarcerated minorities is disproportionate (Oleson 9). This is especially true for ethnic minorities, which is why Oleson speaks of black hyper-incarceration instead of mass incarceration. With mass-incarceration a large number of the whole population should be imprisoned and not just "relatively large fractions of a minority population" (2). While African Americans are incarcerated the most, Hispanics and other ethnicities' incarceration numbers are high as well (see table 1). This hyper-incarceration is caused by the U.S. federal government's fixation on reducing blue collar crime, which is also referred to as the poor man's crime. By attacking blue collar crime, the U.S. government focuses on impoverished neighborhoods where the majority of the population consists of ethnic minorities and poor whites (Clear 5). For example, the ongoing War on Drugs, initiated during Reagan's presidency in 1982, was presumably a "response to the crisis caused by crack cocaine in the inner-city neighborhoods" (Alexander 5). Thus, ethnic

minorities and poor whites became the prime targets of the federal government’s War on Drugs, with “local police departments patrolling

Table 1: “Imprisonment rates of U.S. residents, based on sentenced prisoners under jurisdiction of state or federal correctional authorities, by jurisdiction, sex, and race or ethnicity, 2008 – 2018” (Carson 9).

Year ^a	Per 100,000 U.S. residents			Per 100,000 U.S. residents within each demographic group				
	Total ^b	Federal ^c	State	Male	Female	White ^d	Black ^d	Hispanic
2008	506	60	447	956	69	250	1,580	691
2009	504	61	443	952	67	245	1,544	694
2010	500	61	439	948	66	245	1,500	672
2011	492	63	429	932	65	240	1,447	660
2012	480	62	418	910	63	236	1,382	636
2013	479	61	418	907	65	234	1,347	622
2014	472	60	412	891	65	233	1,305	605
2015	459	55	403	865	64	228	1,247	586
2016	450	53	397	848	64	222	1,206	585
2017	441	51	390	831	63	221	1,169	569
2018	431	50	381	810	63	218	1,134	549
Percent change								
2008-2018	-14.9%	-16.4%	-14.7%	-15.2%	-8.8%	-12.8%	-28.2%	-20.5%
2017-2018	-2.4	-2.1	-2.4	-2.5	-1.4	-1.4	-3.0	-3.5

Source: Carson, E. Ann. “Prisoners in 2018.” US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, April 2020. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p18.pdf>

black neighborhoods as if they were occupied territories” (Roberts 1946). Media coverage on drug abuse and the War on Drugs caused an increase in funding for the cause, as well as increased legislative support. Nevertheless, evidence that the War on Drugs was launched in reaction to crack cocaine was never actually found (Alexander 5). This makes the focus of the federal government and local police forces on minorities suspicious, and increases the belief that their prosecution is based on racist and class-cultural biases.

The belief that the targeting of minorities is based on racism and socio-economic class has to be nuanced to some extent. The fact that there are prison rules about intimacy and reproduction is not in and of itself evidence that the system is racist. However, given a system that is implicitly racist, the fact that this same system stops its inmates from reproducing makes it eugenic. Even if this eugenic component is not intentional, it is still a form of collateral damage which is perceived by some as beneficial to society.

It is widely understood that going to prison is a punishment, as well as an insurance that the criminal will not be able to commit offenses against the public for some time (Oleson 12). It is less well-known what the additional negative side-effects of incarceration are in terms of procreation (12). Firstly, procreating while incarcerated is made difficult due to the division of prisons in male and female departments. According to Oleson “modern prisons are sex-segregated environments in which sexual contact between males and females is interdicted, extending correctional control even over the bodies of non-incarcerated persons who visit their heterosexual partners” (6). Additionally, correctional control over non-incarcerated people prohibits them from touching their incarcerated partner, such as holding hands and other forms of intimacy. There are only a couple of ways through which inmates could reproduce, of which two are assisted reproductive technology and conjugal visits (Oleson 6).

Proceedings around conjugal visits are particularly worth analyzing in relation to eugenics. Only four out of fifty states allow conjugal visits, which means that inmates in the other forty-six states are unable to be intimate with their partner while incarcerated (12). Although four states allow such visits, this does not imply that prisons in these states are more accessible. Apart from charging exceptionally high rates for phone calls on the receiver’s end, “state prisons are often located more than a 100 miles from urban areas and federal prisons are often located even further” (Jones & Seabrook 136). Because these prisons are distant from urban areas, travelling to them is often expensive (136). It logically follows that the poor do not have the financial means to travel to these prisons, which reduces the chances for regular conjugal visits and procreation. Additionally, high financial costs for phone calls decreases the number of calls to inmates. Consequently, this contributes to the feeling of separation.

States that interdict conjugal visits in prison often also prohibit the usage of assisted reproductive technology. This became evident in *Gerber v. Hickman* (2002), in which inmate Gerber filed a complaint against Mule Creek State Prison in California, because they prohibited

him from providing sperm to his wife so that she could conceive his children. Gerber based his argument on *Skinner v. Oklahoma* (1942), in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that compulsory sterilization of inmates violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. Additionally, he appealed to the right of inmates to marry while in prison. According to Gerber, this “inevitably leads to the conclusion that inmates have a constitutional right to procreate while in prison” (United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, Clause 3). He argued that being unable to conceive a child through assisted reproductive technology while incarcerated is the same as being physically sterilized. Nevertheless, Gerber’s appeal was dismissed by the U.S. Court of Appeals, based on the conviction that the right to procreate from prison is fundamentally inconsistent with incarceration (Court of Appeals). Gerber was not the only inmate whose appeal to procreate by means of assisted reproductive technology was denied. Other cases in which these same reasoning was used are “*Goodwin v. Turner*; *Percy v. New Jersey Department*; and *State v. Oakley*” (Oleson 7).

What *Gerber v. Hickman* demonstrates is that prison rules and regulations exercise a large amount of control over prisoner’s bodies and their ability to reproduce. The consequences for the non-incarcerated partner should not be underestimated either. This is especially true for incarcerated and non-incarcerated heterosexuals. By denying prisoners to be intimate with their partners, or conceive through assisted reproductive technology, they are denied the right to have children with each other. Additionally, incarcerated mothers have fewer rights to see their children. Jones and Seabrook call this the New Jane Crow, which refers to “systematic efforts designed to deny the maternity of black women” (137). Although the following two claims have been overruled in the *Gerber v. Hickman* case, there might be some truth to the claim that incarcerated partners are indirectly sterilized because they are not allowed to procreate with

their non-incarcerated partners. Since minorities are incarcerated in large numbers, this can be seen as a practice based on negative eugenics.

Especially interesting in light of modern eugenic policies is obligatory birth control for incarcerated women, as well as women on probation. Although compulsory sterilization has been forbidden in the U.S. since 1907, there are still practices that seem to be inspired by it. For example, in July 2017 a Tennessee judge approved of a prison program that offered a 30-day sentence reduction to inmates if they agreed to undergo a permanent birth control procedure (Hunter). Although the judge emphasized that the program was voluntary, the American Civil Liberties Union asserted that it can be perceived as form of coercion, and that it “violates the fundamental constitutional right to reproductive autonomy” (Hunter). Additionally, women who are on probation are oftentimes subjected to birth control procedures as well. For example, in 2009 a woman who was on probation for marijuana possession in Virginia underwent an involuntary tubal ligation, which permanently blocked her ability to become pregnant (Hunter). Sam Benningfield, the creator of the program in Tennessee argued that such procedures were necessary for inmates to take personal responsibility, without being burdened with children when they get out of prison (BBC). Evidently, these are examples of what Jones and Seabrook refer to as the New Jane Crow, in which incarcerated mothers are subject to rules and regulation which deny them their chance at maternity. Whether programs like these are racially motivated or not, they make it harder for ethnic minorities targeted by the prison system to procreate. The combination of a racist system and the fact that part of the punishment is to prevent procreation, inevitably creates side-effects that belong to negative racial eugenics.

Another way in which prison rules and regulations directly influence inmates' reproduction opportunities is concerned with the length of prison sentences and the famous “three strikes and you are out” law. This law dictates that habitual offenders will receive a

lengthy prison sentence for their third offense, usually twenty-five years to life (Chen 345). The type and number of offenses that trigger the law's application varies per state (345). A lengthy prison sentence in combination with the overall inability to reproduce from prison, means that inmates are incapacitated for years. This is especially damaging for women, since female fertility rates decrease significantly with age (Oleson 14). It is no secret that the three-strikes law is expensive to maintain, and that it does not guarantee an absolute crime reduction (Chen 363). Thus, it is worth considering other reasons as to why this law is prevalent in many states (Oleson 7). For example, Wilson argues that its popularity can be understood from a eugenicist point of view and relates the law to the U.S.'s eugenic past:

The answer might be found in a combination of the *Buck* and *Skinner* cases. In *Buck*, women like Carrie were to remain in the colonies until they reached the age of natural infertility. In *Skinner*, the punishment of castration for a third offence was unrelated to the crimes he had committed, but would have the effect of preventing him from having children and passing his criminal genes on to them. If a three-strikes law does not increase deterrence, and is financially unsustainable, there must be some justification for its enactment. A eugenics style policy might be one explanation. A prison sentence of 25 years to life would generally mean that if the person is released, he would no longer be biologically able to have children (Wilson 21).

If it is true that the three strikes law is based on a eugenics inspired policy, then the focus of the U.S. criminal justice system on blue collar crime committed by minorities would make more sense. The three strikes law is a great example of a modern eugenic policy, which is exercised on a such a large scale in the U.S. that it affects millions of people (Oleson 7).

However, the question remains whether these laws, rules, and regulations were intended as eugenic or not. Although they are not perceived as explicitly eugenic, I argue that their side-

effects (e.g. decreased chances of procreation and detachment of cultural heritage) should be considered eugenic, even if their negative impact on the procreation of minority groups is unintended. Additionally, these side-effects exist because most of these laws, rules and regulations are based on a eugenic tradition. For example, people like Benningfield argue that criminals need to take personal responsibility and reintegrate in society, and that they would be unable to do so if they would be “burdened by having to care for children” (BBC). Such an explanation for these policies demonstrates that they are based on a eugenic tradition, because the same reasoning was used in relation to the forced sterilization of “unfit” women in the 1930s (Reilly 353). Scientists contended that these women should be sterilized so that they could fully focus on their participation in society, without having the burden of raising children (353).

3.2 Gileadean Rules and Practices as a Reflection on U.S. Eugenic Policies

In both novels, Gilead can be seen as a reflection of these policies in the U.S. Additionally, an inverse reflection is also present, because inmates like Offred are forced to reproduce, and to ensure that they try to conceive they are being watched while having sex. Of particular importance is the comparison between Gilead and the panopticon. The panopticon was designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1791, and is an architectural lay-out for a prison consisting of “a circular, glass-roofed, tanklike structure with cells along the external wall facing toward a central rotunda; guards stationed at the rotunda could keep all the inmates in the surrounding cells under constant surveillance” (Encyclopædia Britannica Inc). Bentham’s theory behind this architectural structure was that inmates were being forced into submission if they felt like they were continuously supervised.

A similar structure is present in Gilead, although it is not a physical structure like the panopticon. Rather, Gilead’s supervision is formed by a non-architectural structure which

produces the same supervision effects as the panopticon. In Gilead, the Eyes and the Guardians function as the guards in the panopticon who are able to continuously watch their prisoners. The Eyes are undercover spies for the Gileadean government who constantly supervise Gileadean citizens and alert the government on any illegal behavior. In chapter thirty, Offred reminisces about the day when she and her family attempted to escape from Gilead before she became a Handmaid. However, they were betrayed because the Eyes knew about their escape and caught them. Offred wonders who could have told them: “It could have been the neighbour, watching our car pull out of the driveway in the morning, acting on a hunch, [...] it could even have been the man who got us the passports; [...] The Eyes of God run over all the earth” (*Handmaid* 298). This passage demonstrates that the Eyes were everywhere, and that their identity was unknown to many Gileadeans. By stating that the Eyes are omnisciently present, Offred indicates that she feels constantly watched, which causes her to be forced into submission. Another quote that indicates that she feels observed can be found in the scene where Offred lies on her bed, and stares at a “plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at [her], even though it can’t see” (151). Although Offred is alone in her room, the presence of the plaster eye makes her feel as if she is being watched. Again, this causes her to behave as if she is being watched even though nobody can see her.

The idea that Gilead resembles a non-architectural panopticon is strengthened by the Gileadean custom that Handmaids are given a number, just like inmates receive a prison number when they first come to prison (Prison Reform Trust). These numbers help prison staff keep track of the prisoners, as well as their belongings and behavior (Prison Reform Trust). When Offred takes a bath, she notices a small tattoo on her ankle consisting of four digits and an eye (101). She states that “it’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape” (101). Like inmates who are identified by their numbers in prison, Handmaids in Gilead are identified by their tattoos. In essence, they belong to Gilead just like

prisoners belong to the state for a while. The only difference is that Handmaids are perceived as a “national resource,” whereas prisoners are often perceived as national scum. Additionally, people who have been to prison in the U.S. will always have a criminal and prison record attached to their name. Interestingly, Offred refers to this by saying that she will never be able to fade into another landscape, because she has been physically marked by Gilead, which will never go away. People who see her tattoo will always know that she was a Handmaid and imprisoned by Gilead.

Apart from the short passage about the Children of Ham, both novels do not elaborate further on the position of ethnic minorities in Gilead. However, they do illustrate the eugenic side effects of parent-child separation, and separation in general. The Handmaids in Gilead did not voluntarily choose their role. Instead, they were abducted and forced into the Red Center where they were indoctrinated with Gileadean ideals, and received training to become a Handmaid. When the women were abducted, their children were taken away from them and their marriages were disbanded. Additionally, almost all books discordant with Gileadean norms and values were burned during its emergence (*Testaments* 63). This can be seen as the start of a cultural genocide at play in Gilead. By separating the Handmaids from their husbands, Gilead ensures the erasure of these people and their potentially unfit qualities. Separation from their husbands and children also ensures that anything that ties the Handmaids to their past and their culture is erased. Handmaids are only allowed to conceive children from men whom Gilead perceives as fit, and thus their unfit husbands have to be disposed of so that they cannot procreate with them anymore. This is especially true for Offred and her husband Luke in the tv series. In one episode, the viewer learns that Luke was still married to his previous wife when he started having an affair with Offred (“Faithful”). He soon divorced his first wife, and got married to Offred. Divorce and adultery are crimes punishable by death in Gilead, which makes Luke a particularly unfit husband in the eyes of the Gileadean government.

Destruction of Handmaids' cultural heritage occurs on a larger scale in the Rachel and Leah Center, also known as the Red Center. Handmaids receive their training here, and the Aunts subject them to retraining programs in an attempt to indoctrinate them with Gileadean norms and values. This becomes evident in the episode where Offred and her fellow Handmaids are in a classroom. They listen to Aunt Lydia who tells them that their fertility is a gift from God and that He left them intact for a Biblical purpose, which is to conceive children for the 'Leaders of the Fateful' ("Offred"). Janine, later known as Ofwarren and Ofdaniel, swears at Aunt Lydia, to which Aunt Lydia promptly electrocutes her and orders two Aunts to take Janine away. When Offred later sees Janine, she notices that one of her eyes has been taken out as punishment. Aunt Lydia also mentions that Janine will still be able to have children, and as long as she does not listen they will continue to mutilate her body as long as those mutilations do not impede her ability to conceive babies ("Offred"). Through mutilation and indoctrination, the future Handmaids are forced to forget about their past lives and cultural heritage. In essence, they are forced to deny their own culture and solely embrace the Gileadean one. This can be seen as cultural eugenics.

Additionally, Handmaids are forced to conceive babies for supposedly barren women of high status. Even though the barren women are not biologically able to conceive children, their preferred cultural values in Gilead ensure that they are given the opportunity to raise the Handmaids' children. This is a good example of class-cultural eugenics, because certain cultural values and socio-economic standards are valued above others. There is a distinction in Gilead between biological motherhood and cultural motherhood. The Handmaids are the biological mothers of their children, but they are solely perceived as breeding stock and unfit to raise children according to Gileadean standards. Thus, their children go to the barren women with preferred cultural values and class status. They will raise these children according to Gileadean standards, and the children will only be aware of these norms and values as they

grow up. A good example of this is Eden Spencer, a young woman who was born and raised in Gilead (“Seeds”). Eden is a true believer, which becomes apparent in the scene where she has a fight with her husband Nick: “All I wanted was to make a real family. Isn’t that what Gilead wants of all God’s servants?” (“Postpartum”). This scene illustrates how the Gileadean government ensures that their regime is maintained through the upbringing of children according to Gileadean customs. Again, this practice contributes to cultural genocide which can be related to class-cultural eugenics.

Lastly, Offred is separated from her daughter Hannah after being imprisoned by the Gileadean government. This corresponds to Jones and Seabrook’s idea of Jane Crow and the denied maternity of women once they are incarcerated (135). This offers a parallel to contemporary prison rules and regulations in the U.S. Some children of incarcerated parents end up in foster care, or in a children’s home. Here, it is likely that they are taught other cultural norms and values than what their biological parents would teach them. One scene from the television series reflects on this practice, in which Offred is pregnant and in the car with Serena Joy, the Wife of Commander Waterford. They drive by a girls’ home, which is a foster home where only young girls live. Serena disappears into the house for a while, only to reappear with Offred’s daughter Hannah. Offred goes crazy and desperately wants to reach her daughter, because they have not seen each other since Offred’s abduction. As Hannah goes back inside and Serena is back in the car, Offred begs Serena to let her go back. However, Serena tells Offred to calm down and states that Hannah is happy and well-cared for (“Night”). This scene demonstrates how Offred’s maternity is denied in two ways while imprisoned in Gilead. She is not allowed to see Hannah, whom she conceived before the U.S. government was overturned. Additionally, she is not allowed to raise the baby she carries in her womb. This corresponds to prison rules and regulations in the U.S. Incarcerated women often cannot see their children, or are not allowed to due to the severity of their crime. Furthermore, when a woman gives birth

in prison, she is not allowed to raise it there. Instead, her child has to go to non-incarcerated family. These examples illustrate that Gileadean practices reflect on contemporary U.S. prison policies and their eugenic side-effects. They particularly reflect on parent-child separation, which can be linked to cultural eugenics.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to illustrate that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reflect on eugenic practices from the Antebellum South, as well as contemporary U.S. society. The analysis was guided by two general questions, which were roughly the same for each chapter. The first

question was how each form of eugenics manifested itself in the U.S. historical narrative. In order to answer this question, a thorough historiography per timeframe was required for each form of eugenics. The second question was how both the novels and television series reflect on eugenic practices from the past as well as the present in U.S. society. In order to answer this question, an in-depth analysis of various scenes and passages was conducted, in which a comparison was made between the historically accurate characteristics of eugenics and Gileadean practices. In answering these two questions, I presented a timeline throughout my thesis in which the evolution of eugenics can be perceived. It can be concluded from this timeline that eugenics never fully disappeared after its global condemnation post-World War II. Rather, eugenics and its practices evolved over time.

Analyses between Gileadean practices and disability eugenics in the first chapter have illustrated that Gilead incorporated negative eugenics on a large scale. The micromanagement of the Wives and Handmaids, who should be impregnated and by whom, is one form of negative eugenics that occurs in both novels. These Gileadean practices created a minority group similar to the minority group created by disability eugenics in the historical narrative. Additionally, Gilead deemed deformed babies unworthy of participating in society. By giving them names such as Unbabies and Shredders, Gilead dehumanized these babies and disposed of them. Similarly, disability eugenics deemed certain people degenerate or disabled in the historical narrative. Unworthy of participating in society, these people were put in institutions, subjected to experiments, and often forced to refrain from procreation.

The analysis of Gileadean practices in relation to practices from the Antebellum South illuminated that racial eugenics was present during this period. This type of racial eugenics is different from the type discussed in subsection 2.1, because it actively sought to increase the births of socially undesirable ethnicities. However, the undesirable ethnicities were perceived desirable in economic terms. Especially useful was the research conducted by Hogarth, who

provided the insights I needed in order to justify my comparisons between Gilead and the Antebellum South. The idea of slave-breeding, and the desire of slave masters and doctors to selectively breed slaves to create more physically sturdy and hard-working slaves, presented comparisons with the ways in which babies were bred in Gilead. In Gilead, the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives at Ardua Hall gave the Aunts information about which couples should marry in order to increase their chances of conceiving a healthy baby. In this respect, both societies utilized comparable selective breeding practices which can be perceived as eugenic. What this analysis illustrated is that racial eugenics already existed during the Antebellum South, but that it occurred in a different form than the racial eugenics during the first half of the 20th century.

Additionally, my thesis has illustrated that the novels do possess a subtle type of intersectionality even though several academics beg to differ. It is true that the novels do not elaborate much on the position of ethnic minorities, apart from the one passage about the relocation of the Children of Ham. The television series has attempted to increase intersectionality by adding different ethnicities to the series, yet the series does not elaborate on their specific positions either. However, when Gileadean society is analyzed in relation to eugenicism and the society of the Antebellum South, it becomes evident that both societies correspond to each other on different levels. For example, the treatment of the Handmaids compared to that of slaves is roughly the same, as well as their status. Additionally, the household structure of a Gileadean household and a plantation household are very similar, as well as the highly religious Puritanism on which both societies were based. Rather than presenting the reader with an in-depth look in the positions of individual ethnic minorities in Gilead, the novels offers resemblances to the Antebellum South. This ensures that there is some intersectionality present in the novels, and the statement that the novels contain no intersectionality loses some of its credibility.

Like the resemblances between Gilead and the Antebellum South with respect to eugenics, similar comparisons between Gilead and contemporary U.S. society are visible as well. By specifically looking at the U.S. criminal justice system and prison rules and regulations, a new form of eugenics became visible. I categorized this form as a hybrid, because it combined elements from disability eugenics and racial eugenics. Essentially, the form of eugenics present in the U.S. nowadays is focused on undesirable cultures and socio-economic classes. I deduced this information by consulting scholarly sources, who illustrated that U.S. prison populations were largely comprised of ethnic minorities and poor white people from lower-socioeconomic classes. Even though it is unjust to argue that the U.S. criminal justice system and prison rules and regulations are meant as eugenic, their side-effects can be perceived as having a negative eugenic impact on the incarcerated, because they severely impair incarcerated minorities' chances to procreate. For example, it was concluded in *Gerber v. Hickman* that procreation from prison is ultimately against the basic principles of incarceration. Conclusively, I was able to compare the class-cultural eugenic side-effects from U.S. prison policies to Gileadean eugenic practices in terms of class distinction and parent-child separation.

In general, it can be argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* can be read in light of multiple topics, rather than solely gender oppression. Gilead offers convincing resemblances with all three forms of eugenics from the past and the present, which are disability eugenics, racial eugenics, and class-cultural eugenics. From the analyses I have conducted to support my thesis statement, it appears that eugenics is still present in the U.S. This form is worthy of investigation, because such research might illuminate how the U.S. continues to oppress minorities through negative eugenic side-effects produced by prison policies. Although Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in light of political developments in the 1980s, my thesis

illustrates that the original version of *The Handmaid's Tale* and practices from Gileadean society remain politically and socially relevant to this day.

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24 April 2020