



Composing the Handmaid: From Graphic Novel to Protest Icon

JOHANNA COMMINS 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

SPECIAL
COLLECTION:
GRAPHIC JUSTICE

RESEARCH



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network

ABSTRACT

This article takes as its starting point Renee Nault's recent adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* into comics form and asks, how is the handmaid composed? The red cloak and white headdress of the fertility slaves in Atwood's dystopian novel make manifest Simone de Beauvoir's famous observation that one is not born but becomes woman. Reading Nault's text within the framework of Cultural Legal Studies, this article suggests that constructions of gender, including legal constructions of gender, are never simple or unproblematic. As law and comics scholarship suggests, the "cross-discursivity" of the comics form allows us to think about the ways in which knowledge production and representation can be contested and expanded. Reading the figure of the female protester who appears dressed in the handmaid's uniform in a similar way allows us to see how law seeks to narrowly construe gender, and the multivalent reality it seeks to exclude within its own framing practices.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Johanna Commins

Melbourne Law School, the
University of Melbourne,
Australia

johannacommins@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

Cultural Legal Studies; gender;
The Handmaid's Tale; protest;
Renee Nault

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Commings, J 2021 Composing the Handmaid: From Graphic Novel to Protest Icon. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 11(1): 2, pp. 1-13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.214>

2019 was a great year for fans of Margaret Atwood's 1985 iconic dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 2010). In September its sequel, *The Testaments* (Atwood, 2019) was launched with a live cinematic event in London, and in the following month it jointly won the Booker Prize (Armistead, 2019). The third season of the Hulu television adaptation was released and a Canadian documentary on Atwood's life and career aired (Lang and Raymont, 2019). The red robe and white headdress of the handmaid was named the "viral protest uniform of 2019" (Ellis, 2019) becoming synonymous with reproductive rights campaigns internationally (Ellis, 2019; Beaumont and Holpuch, 2018; Solis, 2017). Also in 2019 Canadian artist Renee Nault (Atwood and Nault, 2019) published *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel*, the culmination of a seven year project (Dundas, 2019).

This article undertakes a close reading of the graphic novel to ask, how is the handmaid composed? Composition and the related term composure are key ideas in Atwood's text which lend themselves well to the comics form. Here I use comics and legal scholarship to consider the ways in which Nault crafts her handmaid and what this suggests to us about gender and the law. Adopting the frame of Cultural Legal Studies, I then turn to the protest phenomenon and offer a close reading of one striking image within the legal context in which the protester appears.

FROM NOVEL TO GRAPHIC NOVEL

The Handmaid's Tale (THT) was partly written on a typewriter in West Berlin in 1984 and published the following year. It was Atwood's first best seller, won 4 awards, and became both a seminal text on high school reading lists and banned book lists alike (Mead, 2017; Italie, 2020). Considered dystopian fiction by some, but called speculative fiction by Atwood herself (Mead, 2017), THT tells the story of Offred, a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. Set in the not-too-distant future, white Christian fundamentalists have violently overthrown the US government and replaced it with a regime steeped in a version of the Old Testament. Environmental degradation has resulted in declining fertility and in response to this crisis the Commanders of Gilead have acted to strictly control fertility and ensure viable children are raised in commanders' households. To this end, each such household is given a handmaid – a woman whose fertility is proven – to provide a child to the commander and his wife. Older women known as 'marthas' fulfil the role of housekeepers and other women deemed deviant or useless are sent to the radioactive colonies and worked to death. Enthusiastically training and policing the handmaids in their sacred duties are the aunts, pious women who serve as subalterns in the new regime. African Americans are sent to racialized "homelands"; Jews who refuse to convert are dumped in the ocean, and so-called dissidents, including doctors who practised abortions before the procedure was outlawed, are executed, their corpses left to rot on the Wall. As in all totalitarian regimes, surveillance is paramount: in Gilead the Eye becomes the predominant symbol, linking God, the commanders and the secret police under whose eyes the handmaids are routinely scrutinised.

THT has been reworked, reinterpreted and recirculated numerous times in the last 35 years. It has appeared in the form of a movie (1990), an opera (Ruder, 2000), a ballet (York, 2018), radio plays, and the popular Hulu television series (2017). This latter iteration inspired the protest costume's appearance at the State Capitol, Texas, in March 2017 in an event organised by NARAL Pro-Choice Texas during the reading of Senate Bill 415 which proposed a ban on an abortion procedure in the second trimester (Solis, 2017). Subsequently, handmaid protesters have appeared across the United States and in countries including the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand.

In 2012 Atwood invited 2 editors and an art director from McClelland and Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada, over to her house to discuss the possibility of turning one of her novels into graphic form (Dundas, 2019). Atwood is no stranger to this form herself, having drawn her own comics and illustrations since childhood as well as working collaboratively on the *Angel Catbird* series (Atwood, et.al., 2016). The unanimous decision was that THT was ripe for adaptation. THT powerfully lends itself to the comics form in its use of framing devices – epigraphs, dedications, *Historical Notes* – and a monologue which sees us move between

interior and exterior modes. In the frontispiece of her book, *Why Comics: From Underground to Everywhere*, Hilary Chute (2017) employs panels from Daniel Clowes' *Ice Haven* where a character eating cereal in his underwear muses on the nature of comics:

While prose tends toward pure “interiority”, coming to life in the reader’s mind, and cinema gravitates toward the “exteriority” of experiential spectacle, perhaps “comics” in its embrace of both the interiority of the written word and the physicality of image, more closely replicates the true nature of human consciousness and the struggle between private self-definition and corporeal “reality”.

This seems to me to be a core element of a medium that continues to evade a settled definition (McCloud, 1994; Chute, 2010, 2017).

After her proposal was selected, graphic artist Renee Nault, creator of the *Witchling* series, began by storyboarding the novel and choosing what scenes to prioritise in consultation with Atwood and the publishing team. A wrist injury delayed the project’s completion, but the timing of its publication neatly dovetailed with the premier of the third Hulu season. In interviews, Nault has stated that she avoided watching the Hulu series while working on the project out of concern that it would influence her interpretation of the text (Dundas, 2019). Nault has said that in devising the look of the graphic novel, she wanted her images to be “personal, symbolic and surreal” (Chen, 2019, 71). While an image that is both personal and symbolic might seem like an oxymoron at first mention, I think that Nault is pointing to an important plurality, an idea to which I will return shortly.

The back cover of the graphic novel bears the legend: ‘Everything Handmaids wear is red: the colour of blood, which defines us.’ The colour red swamps this text, just as the red outfits the handmaids are required to wear swamp the handmaids in Nault’s depiction. This is a glossy, hard cover book, with painterly watercolour images and small neat handwriting. While the handmaids’ red signifies menstruation and fertility, elsewhere red signifies the spilling of blood, violence. In a two-page spread that captures the juxtaposition of troubling memories (*Figure 4*), Nault draws red leaves against a black background. It is only much later in the graphic novel that we see that these leaves mark not only the autumnal abortive escape from Gilead, but the violent separation of Offred from her husband and daughter. Writing about Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Adrielle Mitchell (Mitchell, no date) recalls Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* to address comics’ internal structure. She notes:

[T]he reader, perhaps initially below the threshold of conscious meaning-making, recognizes patterns, resonances, repetitions which bind distant panels together, in, as Groensteen puts it, *iconic solidarity*...

[...]

The reader/viewer’s job, then, is to choose these details suffused with meaning, and to seek their complements elsewhere in the text; “comics,” writes Groensteen, “is not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution; it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together”

In the comics genre, spatial relations occur across panels and pages *and* the text as a whole. Nault exploits this to create iconic solidarity in many forms including: Gilead’s symbolic eye-with-wings; the flowers in Serena-Joy’s garden which take on the sinister form of hanged handmaids; and the object that brings these two together: the ceiling relief in the shape of a wreath that watches over Offred. As Mitchell notes: “the very act of finding connections across temporal or spatial distance mirrors the act of constructing memory”; an act that has powerful meaning for Offred, as I go on to discuss. Nault’s work does not illustrate Atwood’s text but creates it anew employing the complex grammar of her chosen form.

Nault’s handmaids are almost triangular in outline: their tiny heads sit atop robes that sweep in confident A-lines to the ground, concealing their feet. While the handmaids are sometimes in the foreground of the picture with features and expressions clearly defined, they often recede into the background until they are mere dashes of red below blank faces (*Figure 1*). In their repetition and scale Nault captures something of their symbolic nature: she has taken Atwood’s description and fashioned an icon. I turn now to consider this icon through the “multiframes” (Giddens, 2018) of Cultural Legal Studies.



Figure 1 Nault, R. (2019) *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, n.pag). © O.W. Toad.

THE COMICS HANDMAID AND CULTURAL LEGAL STUDIES

Cultural Legal Studies is an interdisciplinary field that considers relations between various means of cultural production, among which law is only one. Such scholarship has links to the critical legal studies movement that grew out of the United Kingdom and the law and literature branch of North American jurisprudential thought (Sharp and Leiboff, 2015). In recent years Cultural Legal Studies has been extended and enriched to include dialogues between law and film and TV; law and dress; law and architecture; and law and comics. Contemporary scholarship in this area challenges the notion that the “and” merely brings two distinct fields together (Rush and Kenyon, 2004; Sharp and Leiboff, 2015). Picking up on this trend, Thomas Giddens (Giddens, 2018, 2) writes that the threshold crossing enacted by something beyond “simple interdisciplinarity” challenges “the very existence of that threshold” continuing:

When we reject the limits of traditional legal texts, we not only challenge law’s limits but also the forms in which law can appear – and thus cultural legal studies can be wrought as a breed of aesthetics. As aesthetics, the focus shifts to the consideration of the form and presentation of knowledge – be it visual, verbal, multimodal, or otherwise. In this expanded world – this world of cultural legal aesthetics – we find multiple forms of law beyond the dry texts of statutes, judgments and policy documents: a jurisprudential world of popular imagination and visual codes, diverse in its cultural dynamism, burgeoning with the traces and hallmarks of legality. But this ‘other world’ is also one of rich humanity and aesthetic experience, of the complex human realities that dwell beyond the limits of law’s rational order.

Giddens (2018, 1–27) builds on the work of his predecessors to suggest that frames rather than thresholds becomes the galvanising metaphor of Cultural Legal Studies. The formal elements of comics, primarily their “multiframes” Giddens suggests, open up a productive, polyvalent space for considering how we come to know and interact with the world. He writes (2018, 5–6):

Each frame becomes just one element in a complex ecosystem of knowing, integrated as much as separated, bounded as well as boundless. Within such a multiplicity, we can abolish law’s cultural thresholds and understand law as part of a rich and universal tradition of encountering or creating the world from infinite possible perspectives. In such a project, we are not crossing boundaries but denying their existence. Law is more than a single frame – always more.

As a feminist jurist, questions of gender are a key concern and I cannot fail to acknowledge the ways in which those traditional legal texts have operated to shape, form, suppress, oppress, exclude, silence and erase certain bodies – many of them other than white and male. If we are truly going to embrace a complex ecosystem of knowing, we first have to reckon with the tropes that circulate so repetitively that we can no longer see them. Applying the multiframe of comics to the figure of the handmaid allows us to see the ways in which assumptions about women circulate throughout our culture through images, words and omissions. Such an undertaking coincides nicely with Atwood’s enduring project of highlighting in order to undermine the stories we tell ourselves (Wisker, 2016).

Early on in her narrative, Offred makes the observation (Atwood, 2010, 76):

“I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.”

As Suparina Banerjee (2014) has noted, Offred’s words echo Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement from *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 2011, 283):

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.

In an early article in *Yale French Studies* Judith Butler (1986) discusses de Beauvoir’s famous phrase in a way that anticipates her later publication, *Gender Trouble* (1990). She acknowledges de Beauvoir’s crucial distinction between sex and gender, and understanding of the latter as “the variable modes of [the] body’s acculturation.” For Butler (1986, 36), de Beauvoir’s use of “become” is ambiguous, so that:

Gender is not only a cultural construction imposed upon identity, but in some sense is a process of constructing ourselves.

In other words, while society may impose and regulate ideas of masculinity and femininity upon us, we are also at liberty (to various degrees) to play with these imposed ideas. Butler (1986, 45) writes:

the body is a field of interpretive possibilities, the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have become imprinted on the flesh. The body becomes a peculiar nexus of culture and choice, and ‘existing’ one’s body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms.

I suggest that Atwood’s use of “compose” has a similar ambiguity. Offred both dresses herself in the imposed costume of the handmaid and creatively constructs herself through memory, ironic commentary, and relational webs.

We see this plurality early on as Nault shows Offred dressing in her handmaid “habit” (Atwood, 2010, 34): in close-up we see Offred slipping red stockings into red shoes, pulling up long red gloves, and adjusting her white headdress (*Figure 2*). These stages of dressing are not



Figure 2 Nault, R. (2019) *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, n.pag). © O.W. Toad.

neatly compiled within panels but instead cohabit the space awkwardly: an arm reaches into the frame across Offred's head, feet intrude from above. This focus on body parts instead of the whole person is an important theme in the text where women are reduced to interchangeable bodily resources that serve the regime. After describing the prevalence of the colour red (mentioned above) Offred notes, in the bottom right hand panel: "I never looked good in red, it's not my colour." This ironic aside performs a sleight of hand that undermines the authority of the "habit" she is forced to adopt.

Nault has stated that while she uses the grey typical of dystopian comics in the background of a lot of her images, elsewhere she uses the colours imposed by the regime to delimit the spheres of influence imposed upon women – so that Serena Joy's sitting room is lavishly blue, the colour of the commanders' wives; and the kitchen, the realm of the marthas, is awash in their uniform green (Dundas, 2019). Even in Jezebel's Nault restricts herself to a limited palette of pink, yellow, purple and blue. It is only in Offred's flashbacks to the time before Gilead that colour emerges in all its variation.

In an image that spreads across two pages and omits frames, Offred and her shopping partner Ofglen walk their regular route to the grocery store (*Figure 3*). As they do so, Offred recalls a different visit to the same street, this time with her daughter to buy ice cream. If we read the image from top to bottom on the left-hand side, and then top to bottom on the right hand side, we can see how the memory intrudes and recedes as Offred walks along. If we read from top to bottom across both pages, our eyes are drawn to the zigzag, from the grey buildings in the top left corner to the ice cream counter in the bottom right. Our eye lingers on the zigzag and almost involuntarily traces it forwards and backwards and forwards again. This movement, in and out of memory, and in and out of different temporal zones which seem to co-exist, conveys something of the narrative's temporal uncertainty and Atwood's suggestion that while Gilead might disappear eventually, it will not remain gone for long. Through Nault's use of colour and the reader's active participation in deciphering meaning, we see the immediate contrast between the rich and varied world of "before" and the flattened existence of the contemporary republic and understand that *both of these constitute Offred's reality*.

The formal elements of comics – "gutters, panels, tiers, balloons, bubbles, bleeds, splashes" (Chute, 2017, 23) – create a "cross-discursivity" (Chute, 2010, 5) between word and image where neither is privileged and each exists in a dynamic relationship with the other. The use of the frame or panel allows the temporal to be represented spatially, so that each panel conveys a moment in time which occurs in relation to another moment in time contained within another panel. Although early comics artists devised such panels to be read sequentially



Figure 3 Nault, R. (2019) *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, n.pag). © O.W. Toad.

(McCloud, 1994), in fact it is the reader who determines the order and pace of reading. Drawing on the work of Scott McCloud, Art Spiegelman and Chute, Karen Crawley and Honni van Rijswijk (2012, 101) note:

The reader of the graphic novel is an active participant in the construction of meaning at multiple simultaneous levels. The combination of pictures...and writing... makes reading comics an activity which takes place in different time frames: one can look at the images, then the text, or read both together, or sequentially. Multiple timeframes are also evident in the comic's panels which convey information in both vertical and horizontal movements of the eye, as well as in the analogue of images implied by the entire page appearing in the background of any single panel.

This active participation Chute suggests, avoids the common pitfall of looking at women via the objectifying (male) gaze of the camera. Quoting an earlier work co-authored with Mariane DeKoven, Chute (Chute, 2010, 9) notes that the female comics writer:

“must slow down enough to make the connections between image and text and from panel to panel, thus working, at least in part, outside of the mystification of representation that film...often produces.” Hence while the visual form of the graphic novel enables an excess of representation...it also offers a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation.

The self-reflexivity that Chute and DeKoven point to is modelled by Offred throughout her tale.

At night alone in her room and freed of her uniform, Offred curates herself through selecting and narrating the memories that best serve her. Nault portrays this through the layering of rectangular images in panels which in their scale seem to appear and recede. Sometimes trauma intrudes upon this process as Offred's memories of the time before Gilead are interrupted by glimpses of harm. Again in a two-page spread Nault shows a series of overlapping rectangles which neatly condense Offred's life with her husband Luke: from clandestine lunchtime meetings at a hotel room, to marriage, to the birth of a baby, to that baby's emergence into girlhood (Figure 4). These recollections are interrupted on the bottom of the page by two outstretched hands reaching for each other from out of the black background and the repeated refrain: 'But then what happened?' On the right-hand page pills cascading downwards amongst frames of hospital scenes connect snippets of conversation and the photo of a child wearing the white dress and wimple of a commander's daughter. The two pages are linked in the background by Offred's flowing hair. In the bottom right-hand corner Offred stares out of the page, wide-eyed and unseeing.



Figure 4 Nault, R. (2019) The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel (London: Jonathan Cape, n.pag). © O.W. Toad.

In their analysis of Art Spiegelman's work, Crawley and van Rijswijk (Crawley and van Rijswijk, 2012, pp. 95; 114) trace the way in which "Spiegelman offers multiple narratives and figures to represent the multiple effects of the traumatic" and in doing undermines "law's demands for interpretive and normative finality". Nault's work is engaged in a similar project. We see this in chapter six of the text where the dry words: 'The Ceremony goes as usual' usher in fourteen silent panels depicting Offred's rape from various angles. Several things occur here: we get the sense that time has slowed down, and like the commander on top of Offred, is a deadweight that must be endured; we become aware of and implicated in the act of looking through the multiple perspectives many of which are not Offred's; and we bear witness to the structural nature of the violence: this is not a one-off clearly defined trauma as law would like to claim, but part of a much larger web of dysfunctional relationships, state violence and empathetic failures (Crawley and van Rijswijk, 2012). The law's failure to take adequate account of the reality of sexual violence forms part of a larger discourse on reproductive rights and is discussed later in this article.

That the Handmaid is a *legal* category is made explicit in Offred's observation: "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful, and women who are barren, that's the law (Atwood, 2010)." The law in Gilead does not recognise the complex, messy, fluid woman that Nault depicts in multiple colours and frames – it has erased that woman as surely as it has erased her name. Offred as handmaid then is a legal persona – she can only appear before the law as Offred – one who walks a perilous line between 2 legal categories of Gileadian women: fruitful and barren. This is Offred's third and final placement in a commander's household and if her placement here does not prove "fruitful" she will be legally declared "unwoman" and sent to the colonies to be worked to death. What Nault's images show is that the woman Offred was before, June, cannot be so neatly excised from her new legal identity. In the next section I want to suggest that this legal category is premised on a social construct of gender that has been circulating within and without the law for a long time. By adopting the uniform of the handmaid, protesters invoke this spectre and demonstrate the ways in which the law works to categorise women's bodies while simultaneously relegating the feminine to a decorative, exterior position in law's symbolic order.

THE PROTEST HANDMAID

Since 2017, protesters have gathered to urge the decriminalisation of existing abortion law (Queensland, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland); urge greater access to legal abortion (Argentina); counter anti-abortion protests (New Zealand); protest specific legislative amendments to existing reproductive rights, including the so-called "heartbeat legislation" in the United States (various states); signify support for the #metoo and #timesup movements (Hollywood, Los Angeles); and condemn the actions, policies and rhetoric of particular (male) leaders: Donald Trump (London and Poland); Vice President Pence (Philadelphia); state representative Robert Fisher (New Hampshire); and (then) Supreme Court Nominee Brett Kavanaugh (Washington DC) (Beaumont and Holpuch, 2018). In late 2020 handmaids protested the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the US Supreme Court Bench following the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Baker, 2020).

On 7 May 2019 photographer Elijah Nouvelage took a photograph of a single handmaid outside the State Capitol building in Atlanta, Georgia. It was picked up by Reuters and published that day on *The Guardian* website (Editorial, 2019). The Georgian handmaid, as I shall refer to her, adopts the typical handmaid posture: head lowered and hidden from our gaze by the wings of her headdress. She has positioned herself at the bottom of a substantial staircase and holds a sign reading TRUST WOMEN, red font on a white background, echoing her own limited colour scheme. I don't know who this woman is, or what in particular compelled her to appear that day. Media reports suggest that she was just one of many protesters who stood outside the State Capitol Building as Governor Brian Kemp signed the Living Infants Fairness and Equality (LIFE) Act H.B. 481 S Res (2019) (H.B. 481) into law. H.B. 481 seeks to amend Georgia's existing abortion law to prohibit abortions where a foetus has a "detectable human heartbeat"¹ except in 3 cases: "medical emergency"; pregnancy as a result of rape or incest; or where a physician

1 The suggestion is that this occurs at approximately 6 weeks from conception, but medical practitioners disagree with the term "heartbeat". See: (Glenza, 2019)

determines that the pregnancy is “medically futile”. The amendment was due to come into force on 1 January 2020.

On 1 October 2019 the District Court for the Northern District of Georgia Atlanta Division granted a motion for preliminary injunctive relief against Kemp (*Sistersong v Kemp*, 2019). The plaintiffs, Sistersong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective on behalf of itself, its members and numerous health organisations and their patients, sought an injunction against the enactment of H.B. 481 on the basis that it violated rights to privacy, liberty and due process under the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Part of this argument was that the proposed law conflicted with the Supreme Court’s central holding in *Roe v Wade* (1973) that abortion was lawful before a foetus reached viability. The Court found that the plaintiffs had succeeded in meeting the burden of a likelihood of success on the merits and granted the injunction sought.

Having set out that basic context for the image of the Georgian handmaid, I want to employ Giddens’ concept of the multiframe to read the protest figure in multiple ways. In his concluding chapter, Giddens (2018, 196) writes:

The way we read the multimodality of comics can open a window onto cultural struggles over the wider production and presentation of knowledge, as well as the value placed on the form(s) of knowledge that are suitable for the important task of articulating lawful relations: in short, reading comics questions the form of law. In their multimodality, as well as their constitution of readership, comics are a site where the form of knowledge is fought over, where the possible modes of epistemic being are engaged and played with, and the precarity of any singular form of knowing is made overt. It is in the epistemic peripatetic required by this multimodality that the multiframe of knowing – and its unconscious – becomes apparent. Thus, if we are to imagine a form of law that remains ‘in touch’ with its own position within the epistemic multiframe as well as the broader unconscious outside all knowing, a multimodal form is required.

As I noted earlier, media reports suggest the Georgian handmaid’s vigil on 7 May 2019 was not a solitary one. Images caught by other photographers show a group of handmaids holding signs addressing named senators (*US: Georgia’s Republican governor signs early abortion ban Al Jazeera*, 2019); handmaids with various other signs including TRUST WOMEN with colours reversed (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2019); and a motley crew of protesters of different ages, genders and ethnicities displaying a multitude of slogans on signs, banners and t-shirts (Provenzano, 2019). If we hold these images together with the Georgian handmaid in a multiframe, we see the handmaid composing herself in the multiple ways that Nault’s work pointed to. Here is both the imposition of a legal subjecthood and “the complex human realities that dwell beyond the limits of law’s rational order (Giddens, 2018).”

Earlier too I claimed that Nault had fashioned an icon. I read a similar iconography in images of protesters that adopt the (false) modesty of the handmaid, as the Georgian handmaid does. Writing about the female genealogies of contemporary (common) law, Peter Goodrich (2013, 157–158) calls forth the image of Justitia:

The innocence of law, its iconic representation as a system in the image of Justitia, thus signals a deep irony. It can be formulated best in terms of the dissemblance that presents the emblem of the legal system as a whole to be justice as a woman, in the context of a substantive discipline of law that denied personality, inheritance, and public office to women. Such, however, is the logic of the icon: it can never be present, it represents that which cannot appear for itself. Thus, as the representation of the rule of law, of pure governance or totality, Justitia can never be present as the content of the system. That justice is represented as a woman and that the reality of her feminine form, her body, exists precisely outside the legal institution as its image, connotes further ironies. One such irony must be the reemergence in the sixteenth century of the symbolization of justice as a blindfolded woman. How better to represent an inaugural and mathematically repeated justice than as blind to the world? How better to repress the body than by closing its eyes and forcing it into an internal and dark world of the spirit? How better to figure the control or subjection of woman and of her passion than by hiding her eyes – theologically and, poetically, her soul – from the vision of the law? In the last instance could it not be argued that

through blindfolding a woman, through erasing her face, the representation of the purity of law was only possible through the practice of injustice?

Elsewhere Goodrich and others have paid close and careful attention to the shifting resonance of blind *Justitia* (Goodrich, 2013; Manderson, 2015), including in comics form (Peters, 2019). What interests me here is the idea of a feminine icon existing *outside* of the legal institution and denied entry into it. Laws such as H.B. 481 seek to cast as “natural” a vision of womanhood and pregnant bodies that is manufactured. The icon of the handmaid cannot appear for itself because what it represents is a made-up thing. Just as Offred’s presence in the Waterford household invokes the absent presence – her “ancestress”, her “double” (Atwood, 2010), the Offred that came before her and committed suicide – I suggest that the presence of the handmaid outside legislative and court buildings invokes the icon of womanhood that the law seeks to repetitively perform. By making this elusive figure manifest, the protest handmaid intercedes in the law’s symbolic order which would rather she remained invisible.

The irony in this specific example comes to light when we introduce a larger frame which captures the Georgian handmaid and the female figure who watches over her: the *Goddess of Liberty* or *Miss Freedom* (McDaniel, 2014). Erected in 1888, this Statute of Liberty-esq figure resides on the top of the Capitol building’s copper dome and seemingly watches over the government business within. Made of copper and painted white, Miss Freedom brandishes a light in her right hand while her left holds a sword pointed downwards. According to a blog post from the State of Georgia government website, records about the statue were destroyed in a fire in the early 20th century. Her name, purpose, and symbolism remain opaque, but the writer opines that that she wears a “liberty cap” worn by former slaves in Ancient Rome and therefore connotes freedom (McDaniel, 2014). Viewed alongside Miss Freedom the silent, stationary, protest handmaid becomes a living statue that points to the ways in which law continues to embrace feminine personifications of core principles – justice, freedom – while simultaneously denying both to actual living women.

Returning to the cross-discursivity of the multiframe, it is worth looking more closely at the language of H.B. 481. As noted, “medical emergency” provides one exception under which a pregnant person might access a lawful abortion after the approximately 6 week mark when some kind of cardiac electrical impulse can be detected by ultrasound. Medical emergency is defined in H.B. 481 s4(a)(3) as:

a condition in which an abortion is necessary in order to prevent the death of the pregnant woman or the substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function of the pregnant woman. No such greater risk shall be deemed to exist if it is based on a diagnosis or claim of a mental or emotional condition of the pregnant woman or that the pregnant woman will purposefully engage in conduct which she intends to result in her death or in substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function.

There are several things to note here. The first is the repetition of “pregnant woman” which while infinitely better than “mother” (Ginsberg, 2019), denies the existence of bodies that are simultaneously pregnant and not “women”. The second is the emphasis on the risk of *physical* harm to the person seeking the abortion. This can be contrasted with other States where an abortion post-viability is permissible where the patient’s “health...is endangered” (Jones, Witwer and Jerman, 2019). If we take the first sentence of s4(a)(3) to preclude a risk to mental health, this begs the question, what does the second sentence add? It seems to me that it seeks to anticipate situations where pregnant patients, or their healthcare providers, seek to avoid the narrow exemption to the ban on abortions by invoking mental harm. This appears to fundamentally and wilfully misunderstand the nature of mental health conditions, suggesting that they can be fabricated or are inherently less serious than physical health conditions. The use of “emotional condition” makes me think of hysteria and other nineteenth century medical misdiagnoses and puts me in mind of an observation that academic Erica Millar (Millar, 2016, 510) has made in relation to the emphasis on foetocentric grief in abortion debates. She writes that:

The ‘grieving aborting woman’ could thus be considered a contemporary reiteration of the ‘fallen woman’, allotted a life of misery as a consequence of her sexual and moral misconduct.

The gratuitous second sentence of s4(a)(3) goes further than creating two categories of aborting patient (the deserving and the undeserving) it writes into the law an image of women as mentally unstable, desperate and manipulative. The punitive nature of this bill suggests that any woman who dares to *want* an abortion has brought misery on herself and should be made to suffer it. That women are bodies to be preserved for their reproductive functions, not people to be listened to and empathised with, is straight out of Gilead. It does not seem to me to be such a far leap from this reductionist attitude to Ofkyle/Crystal's brutal death (during labour) in *The Testaments* (Atwood, 2019).

To return to the Georgian handmaid, how are we to read her sign, TRUST WOMEN? Is it a command or a plea? A demand to the legislature or a reprimand for their failure to act in this way? Is it a legal pleading before the court that judges the legislature's enactment? Is it concerned with trusting women to make choices about their bodies and family dynamics, trusting female medical professionals, or trusting the elected women whose job it is to represent both? TRUST WOMEN also speaks to women's testimony and the credibility of their words. The difficulty of speaking, and being believed, is glossed over in this bill that allows an exception to the prohibition on abortion where pregnancy is 'the result of rape or incest *in which an official police report has been filed alleging the offense of rape or incest.*' Although an initial allegation of a crime is just that, an allegation, the suggestion that potentially traumatised women could be denied health care because of any one of the myriad reasons they may have for *not* engaging with the criminal justice system is, in my view, a wilful disavowal of the power dynamics involved in sexual assaults and in particular sexual assaults which happen in a family context. To circle back to Crawley and van Rijswijk, such a law assumes a model of trauma as a one-off incident of violence and closes its mind to the systemic nature of structural violence in which the state itself is implicated.

CONCLUSION

The handmaid is composed via the cross-discursivity of her particular genre. Through the juxtaposition of words, images and temporalities Nault makes manifest the ambiguity that de Beauvoir points to – both the (forceful) imposition of cultural norms on human bodies and our licence to embrace, reject, modify, play with, and subvert the same. From the point of view of legal aesthetics, the uniform of the handmaid marks the bounded edges of formal law, but as the graphic novel vividly shows, law's unconscious is not so easily contained – the boundary is porous. When that composition includes emblems of legality – legislative buildings or armed police officers – we are vividly, viscerally reminded of the way in which "emotion, corporeality, tactility, aestheticism and the specular", those elements associated with popular culture and the feminine (Thornton, 2002), are kept separate to legality. In law's symbolic order the feminine as Goodrich has demonstrated (1995), is decorative not constitutive. The figure of the handmaid is a "visual distillation" (Chute, 2010, 12) not of one meaning, but of many: law's violence upon female bodies and the resistance to the same; oppression and complicity; speechlessness and biting commentary. Ultimately the protest handmaid, viewed and read alongside Nault's icon, highlights the ways that (patriarchal) ideas about women, rather than the lived experiences of all different women, continue to inform legal thought and practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the organising committee of the Graphic Justice Alliance 2019 Conference, *Drawing the Human: Law, Comics, Justice*, hosted by the School of Law and Criminology University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia, 28–29 November 2019, for the opportunity to present an early draft of what would become this article.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

This article is a piece of research that underwent double blind peer review by two external reviewers, and it is part of the Graphic Justice Special Collection edited by Thomas Giddens and Ernesto Priego with support from the journal's editorial team. Our gratitude to our pool of peer reviewers. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material under educational fair use/dealing for the purpose and criticism and review and full attribution and copyright information has been provided in the captions.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Johanna Commins  orcid.org/0000-0002-2409-5935
Melbourne Law School, the University of Melbourne, Australia

REFERENCES

- Al Jazeera** 2019 US: Georgia's Republican governor signs early abortion ban. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/georgia-republican-governor-signs-early-abortion-ban-190507152209589.html> (Accessed: 22 January 2020).
- Atwood, M** 2010 *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Vintage Books.
- Atwood, M** 2019 *The Testaments*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Atwood, M** and **Nault, R** 2019 *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Baker, C N** 2020 #RuthSentUs: Red Cloak National Protest Against Amy Coney Barrett Confirmation. *Ms Magazine*, 26 October. Available at: <https://msmagazine.com/2020/10/26/ruth-sent-us-red-cloak-national-protest-against-amy-coney-barrett-confirmation/> (Accessed: 7 November 2020).
- Banerjee, S** 2014 *Science, gender and history: the fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Beaumont, P** and **Holpuch, A** 2018 How The Handmaid's Tale dressed protests across the world. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/03/how-the-handmaids-tale-dressed-protests-across-the-world> (Accessed: 21 January 2020).
- de Beauvoir, S** 2011 *The Second Sex*. United Kingdom: Vintage.
- Butler, J** 1986 Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. *Yale French Studies*, 72: 35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930225>
- Butler, J** 1990 *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chute, H L** 2010 *Graphic Women*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Chute, H L** 2017 *Why comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Crawley, K** and **van Rijswijk, H** 2012 Justice in the gutter: representing everyday trauma in the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman. *Law Text Culture*, 16(1): 93–118, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/voll6/iss1/6> (Accessed 9 February 2021).
- Dundas, D** 2019 The Handmaid's Tale graphic novel lets illustrator Renee Nault find room for her own ideas. *The Star*, [thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com). Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2019/03/21/the-handmaids-tale-graphic-novel-lets-illustrator-renee-nault-find-room-for-her-own-ideas.html> (Accessed: 16 January 2020).
- Editorial** 2019 The Guardian view on abortion: protecting a human right. *The Guardian*, 12 May. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/12/the-guardian-view-on-abortion-protecting-a-human-right> (Accessed: 22 May 2019).
- Giddens, T** 2018 *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics: Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing*. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315310138>
- Ginsberg, J** 2019 *Box v Planned Parenthood of Indiana and Kentucky*.
- Glenza, J** 2019 Doctors' organization: calling abortion bans "fetal heartbeat bills" is misleading. *The Guardian*, 5 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/05/abortion-doctors-fetal-heartbeat-bills-language-misleading> (Accessed: 13 July 2020).
- Goodrich, P** 1995 *Oedipus Lex: Psychoanalysis, History, Law*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Goodrich, P** 2013 *Legal Emblems and the Art of Law: Obiter Depicta as the Vision of Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139565783>
- Jones, R, Witwer, E** and **Jerman, J** 2019 *Abortion incidence and service availability in the United States, 2017*. New York: Guttmacher Institute. Available at: <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/abortion-incidence-service-availability-us-2017> (Accessed: 7 November 2020). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1363/2019.30760>
- Lang, N** and **Raymont, P** 2019 *Margaret Atwood: A Word after a Word after a Word is power*.

- McCloud, S** 1994 *Understanding comics*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- McDaniel, B** 2014 Treasures from the Capitol Museum: Miss Freedom. *GeorgiaGov*, 28 July. Available at: <https://georgia.gov/blog/2014-07-28/treasures-capitol-museum-miss-freedom>.
- Manderson, D** 2015 The Mestases of Myth: Legal Images as Transitional Phenomena. *Law Critique*, 26: 207–223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-014-9149-1>
- Millar, E** 2016 Mourned Choices and Grievable Lives: The Anti-Abortion Movement's Influence in Defining the Abortion Experience in Australia Since the 1960s. *Gender & History*, 28(2): 501–519. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12220>
- Mitchell, A** no date. Spectral Memory, Sexuality and Inversion: An Arthrological Study of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: A Family Tragicomic. *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comic Studies*, 4(3).
- Peters, T** 2019 Superhero Comics and the Seeing of Law: Masks, Icons and Legal Emblems. In: *Graphic Justice Alliance. Drawing the Human: Law, Comics, Justice*. Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia.
- Provenzano, B** 2019 Georgia Democrats Are Cautioning Against a Hollywood Boycott. *One Is Coming Anyway*. *Pacific Standard*. Available at: <https://psmag.com/social-justice/georgia-democrats-are-cautioning-against-a-hollywood-boycott-one-is-coming-anyway> (Accessed: 22 January 2020).
- Roe v Wade*. 1973.
- Rush, P D** and **Kenyon, A T** 2004 Alter Egos: The Mise-en-Scene of Law and Aesthetics. *Studies in Law, Politics and Society*, 34: 1–30. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1059-4337\(04\)34001-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1059-4337(04)34001-9)
- Sharp, C** and **Leiboff, M** 2015 *Cultural Legal Studies: Law's Popular Cultures and the Metamorphosis of Law*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/detail.action?docID=3570048> (Accessed: 13 June 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315755151>
- Sistersong v Kemp*. 2019.
- Sydney Morning Herald** 2019 “All-out ban”: Heartbeat abortion law one of America's most restrictive. Online, 8 May. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/all-out-ban-heartbeat-abortion-law-one-of-america-s-most-restrictive-20190508-p5119y.html> (Accessed: 10 July 2020).
- Thornton, M** 2002 *Romancing the Tomes: Popular Culture, Law and Feminism*. London, United Kingdom: Cavendish Publishing. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/detail.action?docID=220294> (Accessed: 26 January 2020).
- Wisker, G** 2016 Margaret Atwood and Canadian Women's Gothic: Spite, Lies, Split Selves and Self-Deception. In: Wisker, G (ed.) *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-30349-3>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Commins, J 2021 Composing the Handmaid: From Graphic Novel to Protest Icon. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 11(1): 2, pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.214>

Published: 24 February 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

