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There is a balm in Gilead: the mankind's craving for
power

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*For Dad,
Thank you for all the library that you
have built for me*

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Introduction

Presentation of the topic

This thesis asks a question that is at once epistemological and political: *what does it mean to deprive a thinking being of the conditions under which he or she can know, speak, be heard and recognise itself as a knower?* Taking Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), as its central reference point, the thesis develops a sustained philosophical analysis of the mechanisms through which power can organise not only bodies and behaviours, but the very field of what can be known, said, remembered and imagined. A guiding hypothesis is that access to knowledge – understood broadly as the awareness, understanding, and information that a person possesses or can draw upon, and that is true or accurate – is a condition of human agency so fundamental that its systematic erosion constitutes one of the most serious harms that can be inflicted upon a person. Where this erosion becomes structural, cumulative and self-reinforcing, the upshot is what this thesis calls *cognitive erasure*: the progressive dismantling of a subject's capacity to produce, retain, transmit and be recognised in their own knowledge – leading to the annihilation of the epistemic subject

The thesis analyses this erosion across three interlocking levels. The first level is the level of the speech situation such as the everyday exchanges in which a person's word is believed or disbelieved, heard or unheard, taken as testimony or dismissed as noise. Here the central theoretical resources are Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice¹, Kristie Dotson's analysis of testimonial

¹ Fricker Miranda, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

quieting and smothering², and the sociolinguistic and pragmatic analysis, drawing on Austin³, Langdon⁴ and the social philosophy of language, of what it means for an utterance to fail, not because it is false, but because the social conditions for its uptake have been withdrawn. The second level is the level of structures: the institutions, archives, categories, and Foucauldian regimes of truth that decide, often invisibly, what counts as knowledge, who counts as a knower, and which experiences are even capable of being thought. Here the thesis draws principally on Michel Foucault's analysis of power as productive rather than merely repressive⁵, Charles Mills's account of white ignorance⁶, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's notion of epistemicide⁷, and the categorial analyses of Linda Martín Alcoff⁸ and Charlotte Witt⁹. The third level is the level of resistance: the fissures, frictions, and counter practices through which subjects who are epistemically besieged nonetheless can manage to produce shared intelligibility, inhabit imposed categories differently, to transmit counter narratives, and sustain, at considerable cost, the courage to know differently. Here the research is guided above all by José Medina's epistemology of resistance¹⁰, Judith Butler's account of performativity¹¹, and the literature on critical fabulation and counter

² Dotson Kristie, *Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing*, *Hypatia* 26, 2011, p. 236-257.

³ Austin J.L., *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press, 1962

⁴ Langdon Rae, *Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts*, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, 1993, p. 293-330.

⁵ Foucault Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, 1972; *Discipline and Punish*, Vintage, 1977.

⁶ Mills Charles W, *White Ignorance*, in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed Shannon Sullivan & Nancy Tuana, SUNY Press, 2007, p. 11-38.

⁷ Santos Boaventura de Sousa, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, Routledge, 2014.

⁸ Alcoff Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁹ Witt Charlotte, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹⁰ Medina José, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, Oxford University Press, 2013

¹¹ Butler Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge, 1993

memory associated with Saidiya Hartman¹² and Michel Foucault's notion of "insurrection of subjugated knowledges"¹³.

The Handmaid's Tale is read throughout not as an illustration appended to an independently developed theory, but as a text that actively organises the arguments. The Republic of Gilead, the setting of Atwood's novel, is treated as what the thesis calls an "*epistemic laboratory* or "*conceptual laboratory*". This is a stylised, fictional, yet structurally coherent configuration of institutions and practices, in which the social phenomena and mechanisms analysed in terms of epistemic injustice theory appear in a magnified and unusually legible form. Reading Gilead in this way allows the thesis to move fluidly between conceptual analysis and textual close reading, using the novel's narrative texture – its silences, hesitations, ironies, whispered phrases, and its ambivalent academic epilogue – as evidence for claims that are simultaneously about the fictional world of the novel and about the real world epistemic dynamics that the novel magnifies.

Why fiction helps us understand reality

The relationship between literature and philosophy has often been framed as one of subordination: literature illustrates, philosophy argues; literature moves, philosophy proves. This thesis departs from that framing. It treats the relationship as one of *complementary epistemic labour*, in which fiction performs cognitive work that argument alone cannot perform, not because fiction is "easier" or merely persuasive, but because it operates on a different register of representation, one capable of rendering visible the lived, embodied,

¹² Hartman Saidiya, *Venus in Two Acts*, Small Aze 12, 2008, p 1-14.

¹³ Foucault Michel, *Two Lectures*, in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 78-108.

affective, and relational texture of social structures that philosophical argument typically presents in abstract, propositional form¹⁴.

This is not a novel position within philosophy itself. Fricker's foundational text on epistemic injustice draws on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* to illuminate the dynamics of credibility deficit and racialised epistemic oppression¹⁵, not as a rhetorical flourish, but because the novel makes available, in a single scene, a configuration of social relations (a Black man's testimony disbelieved before a white jury, on the sole basis of his racial identity) that a purely conceptual definition of testimonial injustice can name but cannot *show*. Fiction, in this sense, is not an ornament to theory but a mode of access to phenomena that resist abstraction¹⁶. This thesis follows this precedent deliberately. *The Handmaid's Tale* is not treated as decoration for an argument developed elsewhere, but as itself a site where the argument is, in part, conducted. The novel's narrative structure does not merely illustrate epistemic injustice, but, in a sense, it enacts it. And because it enacts it, it allows the reader to apprehend dimensions of epistemic harm that would remain inaccessible if approached solely through conceptual analysis¹⁷. In this sense, the thesis reclaims a long philosophical lineage, stretching from Plato's myths to Rousseau's thought experiments, from Wollstonecraft's narrative vignettes to Fanon's phenomenological scenes, in which literature and philosophy are not separate enterprises but mutually sustaining modes of inquiry¹⁸.

¹⁴ Nussbaum Martha C, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

¹⁵ Fricker, 2007, p. 1-10.

¹⁶ Carrol Noel, *The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, 2002.

¹⁷ Alcoff Linda Martin, *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, *Cultural Critique* 20, 1991.

¹⁸ Fanon Frantz, *Black Skin, White Mask*, Grove Press, 1952; Rousseau Jean-Jacques, *Émile*, 1762.

The claim that imagination and narrative can function as legitimate sources of insight into social reality rests on a simple but consequential observation: many of the phenomena that epistemic injustice theory is concerned with, such as credibility, interpretation, recognition, silence, the felt experience of not being believed, are not self-standing facts about the world but *relational and experiential* phenomena¹⁹. They are constituted in the interaction between individuals and the institutions that record or fail to record their lives.

A philosophical definition can specify the structure of testimonial injustice, a credibility deficit owed to identity prejudice, but it cannot, by itself, convey what it is like to be on the receiving end of such a deficit, nor can it easily display the cumulative, compounding character of such deficits across a lifetime or across a social order²⁰. Nor can it easily show how epistemic harm is sedimented in gestures, pauses, glances, or in the internalisation of doubt that accompanies repeated dismissal. Narrative fiction, by contrast, is structurally suited to representing precisely this cumulative and relational texture. A first-person narrator –such as Offred in Atwood’s novel – can render the *temporality* of epistemic harm, the way small denials accumulate into cognitive erasure; the way a single category – e.g., that of Handmaid – reorganises an entire field of possible interactions, the way a whispered phrase can carry two entirely different illocutionary forces depending on who hears it and the way memory becomes both a refuge and a threat under conditions of surveillance²¹. None of this is easily reducible to a set of propositions. It depends on sequence, voice, rhythm, repetition, and the reader’s own gradual reconstruction of a social world from fragments, a reconstruction that mimics, at the level of reading, the very epistemic labour that the novel’s characters must

¹⁹ Medina, 2013.

²⁰ Dotson, 2011.

²¹ Langton, 1993.

perform under far higher stakes. Fiction thus becomes a method for thinking: a way of isolating variables, exploring counterfactuals, and rendering visible the background conditions that structure social life²². This is why the thesis treats imagination not as a deviation from empirical inquiry but as what some contemporary philosophers describe as a legitimate *modality* of empirical insight: a way of exploring social possibilities, isolating variables that are entangled in actual societies, and thereby recognising patterns of injustice that might otherwise remain obscured by their very familiarity²³.

If narrative fiction has this cognitive function in general, *The Handmaid's Tale* exercises it with particular force in relation to three concepts that are central to this thesis: power, subjectivity and injustice. With respect to power, the novel offers a sustained demonstration of the Foucauldian thesis that power is productive rather than repressive²⁴. Gilead does not merely forbid, it produce – produces categories, rituals, vocabularies, attentional habits, and even the affective dispositions (envy, shame, fear, complicity) through which its subjects relate to themselves and to one another. A philosophical exposition of “power as productive” risks remaining at the level of slogan, the novel renders it concrete by showing, scene by scene, how a regime manufactures the subjects who will sustain it – Aunts who believe their own pedagogy, Wives whose grief is real and yet structurally complicit, Handmaids who learn to experience their own thoughts as transgressions²⁵.

With respect to subjectivity, the novel dramatizes what Judith Butler class “subjectivation”: the process by which norms do not merely constrain pre-existing individuals but produce the very kinds of subject who can be recognised, who can act, who can be held

²² Walton Kendall, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Harvard University Press, 1990.

²³ Srinivasan Amia, The Aptness of Anger, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, 2018.

²⁴ Foucault, 1977.

²⁵ Atwood Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vintage, 1996.

accountable²⁶. OfFred's narrative voice, hesitant, self-correcting, repeatedly aware of the gap between what she is permitted to say and what she knows, is the textual trace of a subjectivity being formed under, and partially resisting, this productive pressure. The novel thus gives philosophical analysis something it badly needs: a sustained first-person record of what subjectivation feels like from the inside, including its incompleteness, its ambivalence and its moments of rupture²⁷.

With respect to injustice, finally, the novel allows the thesis to move beyond the question: *is this unjust?* — a question whose answer, with respect to Gilead, is never in serious doubt — toward the more difficult and more theoretically productive questions: *how, exactly, does this injustice work? By what specific mechanisms is a Handmaid's testimony devalued? Through what specific categorial operations is her experience rendered nameable only in the regime's terms? Through what specific institutional practices is her past made inaccessible even to herself?* It is this "how" question, rather than the comparatively simple "that" question, that occupies the bulk of the three chapters, and it is a question for which the novel's narrative density, rather than any schematic summary of it, is the indispensable resource²⁸.

The thesis recurring description of Gilead as an epistemic laboratory or conceptual laboratory should be understood precisely. It is not a metaphor for extremity, but a device that magnifies the ordinary mechanisms through which real societies organise knowledge, silence, and interpretive authority. A laboratory is a space in which variables that are entangled, diffuse, and often invisible in ordinary conditions are isolated, intensified and made observable²⁹.

²⁶ Butler Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford University Press, 1997.

²⁷ Cavarero Adriana, *Relating Narratives*, Routledge, 2000.

²⁸ Mills, 2007.

²⁹ Hacking Ian, *Historical Ontology*, Harvard University Press, 2002.

Gilead performs exactly this function for the mechanisms of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice³⁰, in real societies, operates unevenly, is often deniable, and competes with countervailing institutions (courts, free press, academic dissent). In Gilead, the same mechanism such as a structurally guaranteed credibility deficit attached to an entire category of persons, operates without significant institutional counterweight, and is therefore visible in something close to its pure form³¹.

The same is true of hermeneutical injustice³² (instantiated by, for example, the absence of a word for the Ceremony's violence), institutional ignorance (instantiated by the destruction of archives and the curated tours for Japanese visitors), categorical extraction (exemplified by the appropriation of Handmaids' reproductive and emotional labour), and the arbitration of knowability (exemplified by the Commanders' monopoly on scriptural interpretation)³³. At the same time, and this is equally important for the thesis's project, Gilead is a laboratory not only for domination but for resistance. Because the regime's epistemic closure is total in aspiration, the small deviations that nonetheless occur such as an ironic recitation, a held glance, an inscription in a closet, a story whispered between Handmaids, stand out with unusual clarity against the totalising background. In a less totalising society, comparable acts of resistance might be harder to isolate from the ordinary noise of social life. Instead, in Gilead, their structure becomes legible precisely because the system against which they operate has tried so hard to eliminate exactly this kind of legibility.

³⁰ defined as occurring when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word", a wrong that targets the subject "in their capacity as a giver of knowledge"

³¹ Fricker, 2007, ch. 1.

³² occurs when "someone has significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation

³³ Santos, 2014.

It is also this dual function – Gilead as a laboratory for both the *production* and the *contestation* of epistemic injustice – that justifies the novel's centrality to the thesis as a whole, and that motivates the detailed reconstruction of its narrative world undertaken in the following two sections.

Plot, background, function and categories

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the territory of what was formerly the United States, called "Republic of Gilead", in an unspecified near future that the novel's own internal evidence and the framing device of the academic epilogue (set at a 2195 symposium) invite the reader to imagine as continuous with their own present. The novel deliberately withholds a precise chronology of the transition from the pre-Gilead world to the regime of Gilead, but it provides enough fragments – gleaned from Offred's memory, the narrator – to reconstruct the essential shape of that transition. These fragments will be referred to throughout the thesis as evidence for its claims about propaganda, institutional ignorance and temporal erasure.

The transition is presented not as a single cataclysmic event but as a process that combines a dramatic precipitating crisis with a longer term erosion that has gone largely unnoticed by the population. The precipitating crisis is a coup: the US President and the members of Congress are killed, blamed officially on islamic fanatics, and the Constitution is temporarily suspended, later becoming a permanent state of alert. What the thesis emphasises about this moment is the population's response, or rather its absence: no rioting, people obediently staying home, watching news and looking for direction. This passivity is read, throughout Chapter 1, as a paradigmatic instance of propaganda's success, not because the population believed an outright lie, but because a plausible

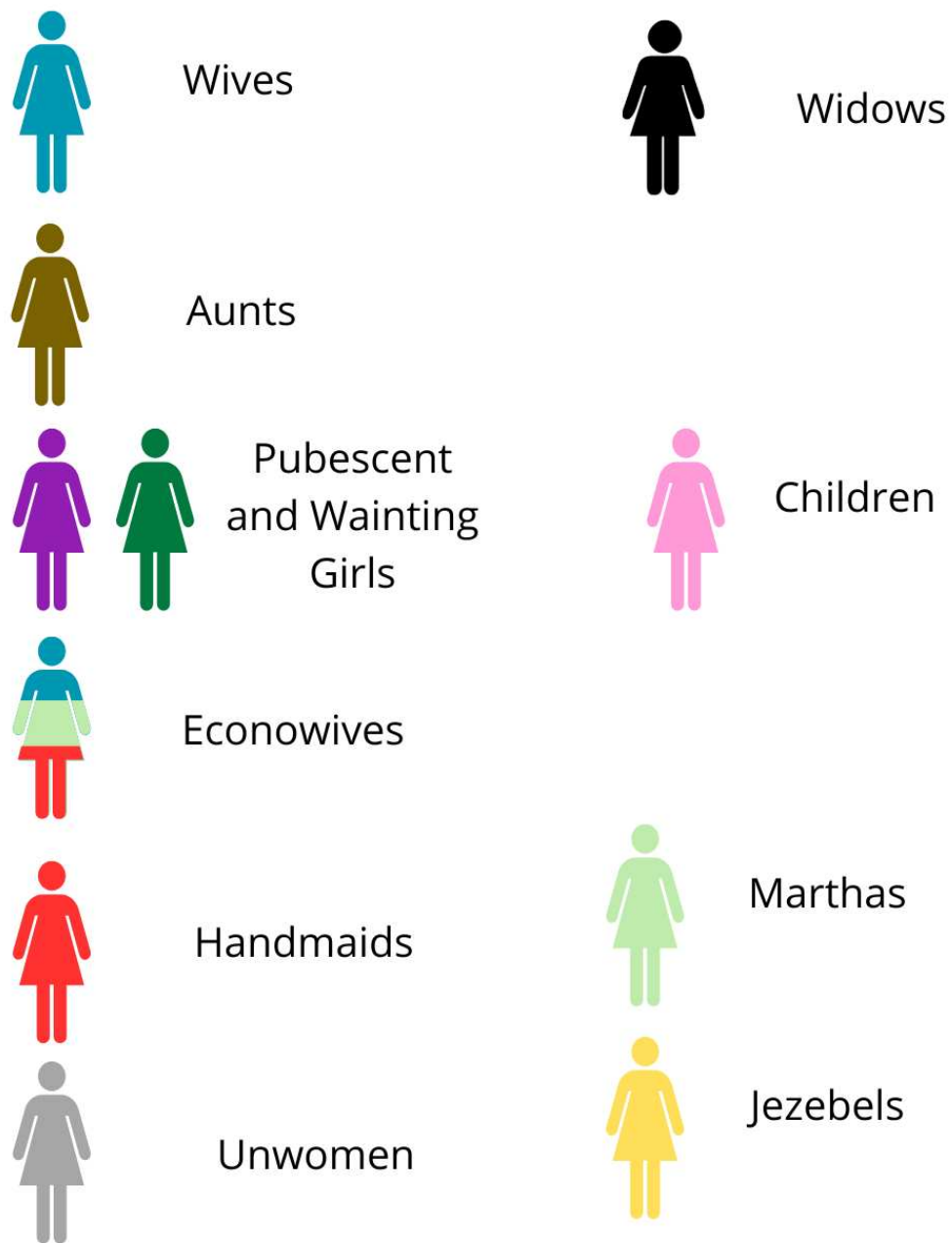
modification of the truth, embedded in a pre-existing narrative of external threat. This was sufficient to install the doubt and disorientation that allowed a small organised group – the *Sons of Jacob*, a religious conservative restorationist movement already present in the political landscape – to seize the resulting vacuum.

Crucially, the novel tells that this seizure built on changes that had been underway for some time before the coup itself. These include the falling birth rates attributed to environmental and biological causes, a climate of anxiety about fertility and reproduction that the new regime would later weaponise as its central justification, the gradual and barely noticed erosion of women's legal and economic independence, beginning with the freezing of women's bank accounts and the transfer of employment and property out of women's names. The thesis treats this gradualism as itself a relevant phenomenon. It is precisely the kind of slow, cumulative, individually deniable process that the framework of cognitive erasure and institutional ignorance is designed to capture, and it stands in instructive contrast to the dramatic, singular violence of the coup itself.

Once established, Gilead reorganises the entire society along theocratic and biologically-deterministic lines, justified through a selective and decontextualized reading of biblical text – a process the thesis analyses in detail in connection with figures such as Rachel and Leah in Chapter 1. The society that results is organised around strict hierarchy of categories – described in Section 4 below – a near total prohibition of literacy for women, the destruction or sequestration of pre-Gilead documents and media, and an elaborate apparatus of surveillance (the Eyes) and ritualised public executions (Salvagings and Particutions) that the thesis reads as central instances of the “violence without noise” and “institutionalised ignorance” analysed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Categories and structure of Gilead

Gilead is organised through a small number of rigidly defined social categories, each marked by distinct dress, distinct linguistic forms of address, distinct permitted or forbidden activities and a distinct position within an overall hierarchy that is simultaneously a hierarchy of value and epistemic standing. The thesis treats these categories not as a backdrop to the analysis but as one of its principal objects: following Alcoff and Witt, categories are understood not as neutral descriptive labels but as normative and relational structures that organise perception, prescribe roles, distribute credibility, and — in the specific sense developed in Chapter 2 — extract knowledge and labour from those they classify while denying them interpretive authority over the meanings produced. The analysis focuses on the women's categories, which are central to the thesis, with a brief note on the men's categories added at the end of the section.



The women categories are:

- Wives: spouses of high-ranking men, identifiable by blue garments, who occupy the formally highest position available to women in Gilead's hierarchy, restricted to supervisory domestic roles and smaller activities such as embroidery, structurally implicated in control of Handmaids and Marthas. This thesis

identify Wives as evidence that categorical privilege within Gilead is itself constrained and corrosive: Serena Joy's situation (see next Section) exemplifies how her category stabilises the category of Handmaids as its necessary non-normative counterpart, while simultaneously foreclosing, for Wives, certain emotional and interpretive possibilities, most visibly Serena's envy of a Handmaid's fertility.

- Widows: wives who have lost their husbands for whatever reason. Depending on their husband's social rank and their own position in the hierarchy, a widow may enjoy freedoms she did not have as a wife. They become solely responsible for the household and the servants, handle administrative matters and the care of any children, and take on some of their late husband's responsibilities. They are identifiable by the color black, which is worn throughout the mourning period. A young widow is expected to remarry very quickly at the end of the mourning period (which lasts one year), while a woman of a certain age, or one with adult children, must withdraw to live alone, remaining in mourning for the rest of her life.
- Aunts: identifiable by brown garments, are the women responsible for the ideological indoctrination and disciplinary training of Handmaids at institutions such as the Red Center and are among the very few women in Gilead permitted limited literacy, insofar as this serves the regime's purposes. The thesis treats Aunts as the clearest institutional embodiment of what Chapter 3 calls *epistemic cowardice*: subjects positioned at the threshold between knowledge and its administration, whose epistemic capacities have been placed in the service of the regime's categorical order.

- Pubescent, Waiting Girls and Child: the first dressed in purple, the second in emerald green and the third in pale pink. They represent the three stages of a young woman's life. The "Purples," often identified by this name based on the colors they wear, are young adolescent girls who have not yet experienced menarche – daughters of men ranging from the middle class to the upper echelons of society. They are trained for their future lives as wives in special schools, where they learn household management and other activities permitted to them. The Violets transition to Greens when they experience their first menstruation, which signifies their fertility and eligibility for marriage. If menstruation does not occur by the end of their training period, the girls are given in marriage along with a handmaiden, thus beginning the cycle of Wives anew. Children are young girls up to age 15 who are raised with the goal of becoming Violets, learning to embroider, paint, and practice basic hospitality skills starting at age 6. This thesis does not address these three categories, as they lack not only any form of power but also any epistemic capacity –as can be conceived in terms of Aristotle's concept of "man in potentiality."
- Econowives: the wives of men of lower social rank, who — unlike Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids — are required to perform all of the domestic, reproductive, and economic roles that are elsewhere divided among separate categories of women, and who are marked by striped garments combining the colours associated with the other female categories. The thesis refers to Econowives to primarily emphasize what their existence reveals about the system as a whole: the fact that the rigid division of female roles among Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids is a *function of rank* rather than an inevitable feature of Gilead's

gender ideology, exposing the constructed and class-stratified character of the categorical system. Their younger counterparts (like the Purples for the Wives) are the Pearl Girls, recognizable by their white dresses and a single pearl earring. They are the daughters of low-ranking men or girls from outside who decide to enter Gilead to live according to its rules. The Pearl Girls have two paths before them: if they are fertile, they become econowives; otherwise, they can pursue a career as Aunts.

- Handmaids: women of proven fertility, recognizable by their red robes and white wings (head coverings that limit peripheral vision and visibility), assigned to the families of Commanders (see below) for reproductive purposes. To be considered a Handmaid, a woman must be recognized both for her fertility and for a “sin” committed before the rise of Gilead, such as adultery (note that remarried women, cohabiting women, and single mothers all fall into this category) and homosexuality. This category constitutes the central case study of the thesis throughout its development: it is demonstrated that it functions simultaneously as a tool for undermining credibility (a Handmaid’s testimony is structurally devalued even before she speaks), as an interpretive framework that replaces an accurate description of her experience (the Ceremony as “sacred” rather than as rape), and as a mechanism of exploitation that appropriates her reproductive and emotional labor while simultaneously denying her any reciprocal epistemic authority over its meaning.
- Marthas: identifiable by pale green garments, are infertile and older women assigned to domestic labour within Commanders' households — cooking, cleaning, and other forms of "invisible" labour. The thesis emphasizes their structural position as a

source of information: as domestic workers with access to every household's daily life, Marthas function, alongside television, as one of the two principal channels through which information (and rumour) circulates in Gilead, a fact that bears directly on the discussion of propaganda and gossip in Chapter 1.

- Unwomen: women who are judged to fall entirely outside the categories Gilead recognises as socially useful — including, notably, women who resist their assigned roles, women deemed infertile beyond use, and "gender traitors" — and who are exiled to the Colonies, sites of toxic and often lethal labour. The thesis treats Unwomen as the limiting case of the entire categorical system: a category whose primary function is to mark the boundary of social existence itself, and whose occupants are, in the terms developed in Chapter 2, rendered "epistemic non-entities," their knowledge and labour extracted until their bodies are exhausted and then discarded.
- Jezebels: women — including, as Moira's case shows (see below), women previously classified as Handmaids or as "gender traitors" — who are coerced into providing sexual services to Gilead's elite at state-sanctioned establishments such as the one OfFred visits with the Commander. In Chapter 3, the thesis treats the category "Jezebel" as the clearest illustration of Ariana Falbo's "hermeneutical distortion": the category does not fail to describe these women's situation, but actively displaces a more accurate vocabulary of coercion and exploitation by framing their presence as the consequence of their own moral deviance — a framing that pre-emptively disqualifies any testimony of coercion that a Jezebel might attempt to give.

These last two categories are two sides of the same coin. Neither is acknowledged in any way by society; they are ghostly figures. But

while the former play a punitive role aimed at their permanent disappearance, the latter are kept under wraps, representing the hidden perversion of a system that refuses to acknowledge its own human fallibility.

There are only four categories in the men's division, which are not distinguished by any specific criteria other than social power and, consequently, their position in the hierarchy. The first are the Commanders, the men ruling elite of Gilead, the heads of households to which Handmaids are assigned and, crucially for the thesis's argument, the group that monopolises the interpretation of the Scriptures and therefore occupies the position of ultimate epistemic arbiter within Gilead's regime of truth. The thesis treats the Commanders' scriptural monopoly, discussed at length in Chapter 2, as the institutional mechanism through which the entire categorical and credibility system is anchored: their interpretations are automatically authoritative, while the testimony of Handmaids, Wives or Marthas is automatically suspect, in a structure that exemplifies Fricker's testimonial injustice operating at the level of an entire society.

The second category consists of low-ranking men who, however, hold important, supporting roles, such as doctors, large-scale farmers, and industrialists. They have no real decision-making power outside their practical sphere, but they possess enough social prestige to be able to receive a fertile wife or a handmaiden. This division, as it pertains to the Commanders, can be likened to the parliamentary system we have in England, where the Commanders would represent a nobility with actual power, and the lower-ranking men would represent a House of Commons with practical authority.

There are then two categories of men "assigned to work," who form the practical and operational backbone of the regime. We have the Eyes, the Gilead's secret police forces, responsible for surveillance

and the enforcement of ideological conformity. They are analysed in Chapter 2 as the institutional embodiment of "attentional engineering": their presence (real, suspected, or merely possible) is what trains Gilead's population into the habits of self-monitoring, averted gazes, and pre-emptive self-censorship that the thesis discusses under the heading of "docile knowers"; and the Guardians, lowest-ranking male functionaries — soldiers, chauffeurs, and general enforcers — who occupy a position of obedience analogous, in certain respects, to that of women of lower rank. They are excluded from interpretive authority, required to perform roles rather than to reflect on them, and (as in the case of Nick) occasionally positioned ambiguously between compliance and complicity in resistance. Within the Guardians is a subgroup known as the Angels — soldiers stationed along the front lines, fighting the actual urban guerrilla warfare involving the expansion and retreat of the state of Gilead. Their exploits are sensationalized by the media, transforming them into instruments of positive propaganda in the eyes of the population. Although they are a subgroup of one of the most disadvantaged categories, the Angels enjoy extensive privileges granted by their media role.

Together, all these categories of women and men constitute a single system with three intertwined functions. The first is *productive*, in the Foucauldian sense developed in Chapter 2: the categories do not describe pre-existing social positions but actively constitute the subjects who occupy them, assigning to each category a distinct repertoire of permitted dress, speech, labour and affect, before any individual choice or deviation becomes possible. The second function is *extractive*: each category channels a specific form of labour or knowledge toward the regime's reproduction, while systematically denying the category's occupants any reciprocal authority over how that labour or knowledge is understood or used. The third function is

credibility-distributing: a person's category determines, largely in advance of anything they say, whether their testimony will be heard, dismissed or never even registered as testimony at all.

The gender division established by this system is not merely a division of labour but a division of epistemic role. Women's categories are each defined primarily in relation to reproduction, domestic labour or sexual availability, and each is denied, to varying degrees, access to literacy, public speech and to the interpretive frameworks (above all, scriptural interpretation) that carry epistemic authority in Gilead. Men's categories are, by contrast, defined primarily in relation to authority, enforcement, and interpretation – even where, as in the case of Guardians, the actual experience of obedience and role-confinement may have more in common with the situation of subordinated women than the formal gender hierarchy would suggest. This thesis pays particular attention to this point, since it complicates any reading of Gilead's categorical system as a simple binary opposition between “men with epistemic authority” and “women without it”. The system is better described as a stratified hierarchy in which gender is the primary, but not the only axis along which epistemic standing is distributed.

Disciplining (in Foucault's sense), finally operates at every level of this system, but takes different forms appropriate to each category's position. For Handmaids, discipline operates primarily through ritual (Ceremony, Testifying), through surveillance (the Eyes, the restricted visual field imposed by the wings), and through the deliberate cultivation of mutual suspicion among women of the same category. For Wives, discipline operates through the categorical foreclosure of certain emotions and through their structural implication in practices that they did not choose but actively administer. For Marthas and Econowives, discipline operates through the near-total absence of any

category-specific ideology comparable to that directed at Handmaids, they are in effect, disciplined by being rendered relatively invisible to the regime's own self-description, a point the thesis connects to the discussion of invisibility in Chapter 1. For Aunts, discipline operates through their conscription into the apparatus of discipline itself, in a structure this thesis describes as subordination by proxy. And for Unwomen, discipline takes its most direct form: exile to space of toxic labour where, as Chapter 2 argues, epistemic and biological extraction converge until the body itself is exhausted.

The detailed mapping of Gilead's categorical system offered in this section is not a preliminary to the thesis' central claims about epistemic injustice and resistance; Rather, it is one of the principal pieces of evidence to support these claims, for three reasons that recur throughout the chapters that follow.

First, the categories provide the mechanism by which the micro-level analysis of testimony, credibility, and silencing developed in Chapter 1 connects to the macro-level analysis of institutions, archives, and regimes of truth developed in Chapter 2. A Handmaid's testimony is not devalued by chance, nor purely by the prejudice of any individual hearer; it is devalued because the *category* "Handmaid" carries, built into its very definition, a credibility deficit that any hearer — Wife, Commander, Aunt, or fellow Handmaid — inherits simply by recognising the category. The categories are, in this sense, the institutional form that testimonial and hermeneutical injustice take in Gilead, and tracing their operation is what allows the thesis to move, without a gap, from Fricker's analysis of individual epistemic wrongs to Foucault's analysis of regimes of truth.

Second, the categories are the site at which cognitive extraction — the asymmetric appropriation of subordinated knowledge discussed in Chapter 2 — becomes visible as a general pattern rather

than a series of isolated episodes. Once it is established that "Handmaid," "Marthas," "Jezebel," and "Unwoman" each name a specific configuration of extracted labour and denied interpretive authority, it becomes possible to see Gilead's entire social structure as, in effect, a machine for converting subordinated knowledge and labour into resources for the regime, without recognition, and to recognise structurally analogous functions, if less totalising, that similar categories fulfill or can fulfil in real-world societies.

Third, and finally, the categories are indispensable to the thesis's account of resistance, because resistance in Gilead is shown, in Chapter 3, to operate *through* these categories rather than *around* them. Moira, for example, does not free herself of the "Handmaid" category by stepping outside Gilead's classificatory system altogether, but by demonstrating through her escape and her subsequent inhabitation of the category "Jezebel" that the regime's categories are neither as stable nor as exhaustive as they present themselves to be. Similarly, Offred's resistance does not manifest itself in a rejection of the category of "Handmaid", but rather in upholding — from within and against it — a counter-description of her own experience. To understand what resistance is, it is therefore necessary to understand, based on the details provided in this section, exactly what it is resistance to, and this is the task to which the chapters that follow are devoted.

Essential Plot and key character

The novel's narrative present follows OfFred, a Handmaid assigned to the household of a high-ranking Commander and his Wife, Serena Joy, in what was once Cambridge, Massachusetts. Handmaids are women of proven fertility, in a society where birth rates have collapsed, who are assigned to the households of high-ranking men for the sole purpose of bearing children, which are then raised by

the Commander and his Wife. OfFred's narration moves continuously between her present circumstances — the rigid routines of the household, the monthly "Ceremony" in which the Commander attempts to impregnate her in a ritualised scene involving Serena Joy, the permitted shopping trips and walks during which Handmaids exchange only ritual formulas — and her memories of her life before Gilead. These are about her husband Luke, her daughter, her mother, her best friend Moira, and her own training at the Red Center under the Aunts.

As the narrative develops, OfFred's relationships within the household become increasingly fraught and consequential. Serena Joy, frustrated by the failure of the Ceremony to produce a pregnancy, arranges for OfFred to have sexual relations with Nick, the household's chauffeur/Guardian, in the hope of securing a pregnancy by other means; this arrangement develops into a relationship that becomes emotionally significant for OfFred. Independently, the Commander begins to summon OfFred to private meetings in his study — initially to play Scrabble, a game from which women are otherwise barred, and later for a visit to Jezebel's, a state-sanctioned brothel where pre-Gilead luxuries and behaviours are permitted to the regime's elite. At Jezebel's, OfFred unexpectedly encounters Moira, who escaped from the Red Center earlier in the novel's timeline and has since been recaptured and placed there.

OfFred's narration is also structured by her cautious involvement with what appears to be the Mayday resistance network, mediated through her walking partner, OfGlen, and through the coded phrase "Under His Eye." The novel's climax involves the sudden, ambiguous removal of OfGlen (replaced by a new Handmaid using the same name, after — it is suggested — OfGlen's suicide to avoid capture and interrogation) and OfFred's own arrest by the Eyes. An arrest that Nick

may have arranged either to protect her by delivering her to Mayday or to condemn her. OfFred's story properly ends at this point of radical uncertainty, with OfFred entering a black van, "into the darkness within; or else the light."

The novel does not end there, however. It is followed by the "Historical Notes," a transcript of an academic symposium from 2195, at which Professor Pieixoto presents OfFred's narrative — reconstructed from a set of audiotapes discovered after the fall of Gilead — as a historical document, discussing its provenance, its reliability, and its possible connection with identifiable historical figures, including a much-discussed speculation about the Commander's identity. The thesis treats this epilogue as a crucial and deliberately ambivalent piece of evidence: it represents, on the one hand, the survival of OfFred's counter-narrative beyond the regime that sought to erase her, and, on the other, a renewed — if subtler — form of epistemic subordination, since her testimony is absorbed into the evaluative criteria of an academic historiography that, as Chapter 3 argues, reproduces some of the very hierarchies of epistemic authority that her narrative resists.

The following characters recur throughout the thesis and are introduced here in summary form, with particular attention to the aspects of each figure that bear on the epistemic analysis developed in the chapters that follow.

OfFred is the novel's narrator and the thesis' central case study on epistemic resistance. Her name itself — a patronymic formed from Of plus the first name of the Commander she is assigned to — exemplifies the linguistic mechanism of subordination analysed in Chapter 1: it erases her pre-Gilead identity and redefines her as belonging to another. Her narrative voice — marked by hesitation, self-correction, repetition, and explicit uncertainty about her own

memory and about whether anyone will ever read or hear her account — is read throughout the thesis not as a stylistic weakness but as the textual form taken by resistant knowledge under conditions of extreme epistemic constraint, and as a sustained instance of what Chapter 3 calls "critical fabulation" and "epistemic courage." We will never know this woman's real name – this will be the only secret she will keep from the reader.

Moirra is OfFred's closest friend from before Gilead and a figure of sustained conceptual significance in Chapter 3. Her escape from the Red Center — an event that the regime's own categories present as logically impossible for a Handmaid — circulates among the other women as a story that, the thesis argues, functions as a piece of "conceptual infrastructure". This is evidence that the regime's classificatory totality is not, in fact, total. Her later reappearance at Jezebel's, where she inhabits the imposed category of "Jezebel" while emptying it of its intended meaning, is analysed as a paradigmatic case of what Judith Butler calls "reworking" a norm from within.

Serena Joy is the Wife of the household to which OfFred is assigned, as well as a former public advocate of the very ideology of domesticity that now confines her. Her character is read throughout as evidence of the costs that Gilead's categorical system imposes even on its formally privileged members, and her involuntary, visceral reaction to OfFred's possible pregnancy is analysed in Chapter 3 as a moment in which the rigid Wife/Handmaid binary briefly destabilises under the pressure of an emotion that the category was designed to make impossible.

Aunt Lydia is the most prominent of the Aunts, the women responsible for the ideological and disciplinary training of Handmaids at the Red Center. The thesis treats her as a figure of "epistemic cowardice" in the precise sense developed in Chapter 3: a subject who

appears, in occasional flickers of self-awareness, to retain some capacity for "knowing differently," but who has placed that capacity at the service of the regime's epistemic order rather than against it.

The Commander (Fred) is the head of the household, a senior figure in Gilead's hierarchy whose private behaviour — Scrabble games, the visit to Jezebel's, his apparent need for forms of intimacy and recognition that his own regime's categories forbid him from seeking openly — is read throughout as evidence that even those positioned as the regime's primary epistemic authorities are not fully contained by its categories, though the thesis is careful not to romanticise this as resistance in any politically significant sense.

Nick is the household's Guardian and chauffeur, whose relationship with OfFred and whose ambiguous role at the novel's end (regime informant or Mayday operative, or both) are treated as instances of the structural uncertainty that pervades the novel's account of resistance: acts and relationships whose epistemic and political significance cannot be settled with certainty from within the position of the people living through them.

OfGlen is OfFred's walking partner and the character through whom the Mayday network and its coded language — above all the double-coded phrase "Under His Eye" — are introduced. Her presumed suicide, read by the thesis as an instance of "testimonial smothering" pushed to its most extreme form, is a key piece of evidence for the discussion of epistemic courage in Chapter 3.

Janine (OfWarren) is a fellow Handmaid whose pre-Gilead experience of seeking an abortion — recounted by OfFred and analysed in detail in Chapter 2 — is the thesis's principal illustration of Nancy Tuana's category of "imposed ignorance," in which institutions are structurally required to circulate misleading information. Janine's subsequent psychological deterioration and her role in a Salvaging are

further evidence, in Chapter 3, of the costs of the regime's epistemic and affective discipline.

Professor Pieixoto, finally, appears only in the "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel but is a figure of considerable importance for the thesis's concluding analysis. His framing of OfFred's testimony — his concern with authentication, his comparative interest in identifying the Commander, and above all his rhetorical question "What would we have done?", which the thesis reads as an instance of Gaile Pohlhaus's "willful hermeneutical ignorance" — exemplifies the ambivalence that Chapter 3 identifies in any institutional reclamation of resistant testimony.

Chapter 1 – The Weight of Silence

1.1 Introduction

“You will be free. Can wear whatever you want. No one’s gonna hurt you for reading, or tell you what to think, or who to love, or what to believe in” (The Handmaid’s Tale)³⁴.

Imagine describing the world we live into to a baby girl who does not know it. Try to close your eyes, and think of what words you will use for our modern days. Will it be the clouds? A playful memory of the university times? Your first kiss, or maybe what ice-cream tastes like. When I think about it, I like to imagine the first book I’ve ever read, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher stone*, a child classic book, capable of transporting the imagination to extreme places, allowing for the first truly complex thoughts.

This initial chapter aims to explore the thesis that access to knowledge is vital for human beings, and that preventing access to it is the greatest harm that can be done to a thinking living being. I would like to discuss the notion of knowledge, and how power is closely linked to it. The basic notion of epistemic injustice leads to reasoning about the necessity of thinking. If we cannot think, are we still human beings? How can power increase hamper, or completely block our mental processes, hide us and make us invisible in the world? And what can we do to avoid being truly invisible?

The first section will be an introductory explanation of how epistemic injustice can erode knowledge, erasing, prohibiting, or limiting it. It is important to provide definitions before beginning the discussion. First of all, the word “knowledge” can have many different

³⁴ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, HULU series, episode 3x13 “Mayday”, min 18:43, Of Joseph explaining to an escaping girl the world.

meanings, but for this research's purposes we will use "awareness, understanding, or information that has been obtained by experience or study, and that is either in a person's mind or possessed by people generally"³⁵ This is a definition more general than the usual definitions adopted in epistemology (such as knowledge = justified, true belief), but one that aims to relate to personal agency and the will to connect with surrounding information. I emphasise, nevertheless, that what I call "knowledge" includes a state or piece of information that is true or accurate.

To define epistemic injustice, we cannot fail to refer to Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice: Power & Ethics of Knowing* where she states that epistemic injustice occurs when the speaker is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower or bearer of knowledge³⁶ by others on arbitrary grounds, such as their sex, gender, geographical origin, skin color, or other factors and characteristics that can lead to identity-prejudicial credibility deficit.

The second section examines forms of violence that operate without explicit physical force, focusing instead on the erosion of epistemic and linguistic capacities. Here, violence is understood not as an overt act but as a subtle and systemic process that restricts what individuals can know, say, or be understood as saying. This section clarifies how power can function silently, shaping meaning, credibility, and interpretation long before any visible harm occurs.

The third section explores what it means not to be heard from an epistemic perspective. It distinguishes between merely perceiving a voice and recognizing a speaker as a credible source of knowledge. Through the lens of social philosophy of language, this section shows how linguistic structures, credibility judgments, and discursive norms

³⁵ Definition available on the Cambridge Dictionary at the link <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/knowledge> consulted by 17/02/2026

³⁶ Fricker 2007, pg. 31.

can silence individuals even when they speak, revealing how power governs not only speech but also its reception.

Lastly, we will define *cognitive erasure*, the concept whereby the erasure or removal of knowledge from a subject becomes the erasure of the individual themselves. We will refer to the systemic suppression, invalidation or disappearance of knowledge systems, memories and ways of knowing, usually as a result of colonization, assimilation or a setting of dominance and structural power, where I want to end in the analysis of this chapter.

In the second and third sections, I intend to address the concept of silence, understood as the inability to express words and thus concepts. Specifically, the second section will deal with a more conceptual silencing, linked to testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, while the third will draw on notions coming from the philosophy of language and linguistics, undertaking a vision of what is meant to be unheard.

To undertake this description, it is useful to qualify the use of the terms “speakers” and “hearer”/“listener”. Note that I do not mean listener in the ordinary sense of the term, but I intend to use and embrace the theory of the hearer used by Fricker in her text³⁷. The hearer in this sense is required to aim to understand what is being listened to, thus introducing the difference between passive listening, purely auditory that does not involve understanding, leading the subject not to interact directly with the speaker; and active listening, which involves working with what is expressed by the speaker and internalizing a content.

The concept of not being listened to, discussed in the fourth section is related to hermeneutics, understood as referring to the impossibility of producing linguistic acts that can be interpreted as

³⁷ Fricker, 2007.

meaningful, as successful acts. The analysis will therefore focus principally on the inability of the subject to convey a message expressed through verbal production. It is necessary to understand the linguistic notion of cognitive emission, signifier and signified, and how these elements can be distorted in the sociolinguistic sphere when politics and power interfere with individual and collective production.

The fourth section will focus on the interpretation of an individual's credibility. I will consider how this credibility can be interpreted according to the social hierarchy that unfolds in their daily life, and how someone can be transformed into something socially invisible by annihilating their credibility.

Although Atwood's narrative is fictional, the society it depicts is not epistemically distant from our own. It is a stylised but entirely possible configuration of human institutions, norms and power relation, and for this reason it offers a clarifying lens through which to examine the mechanisms of epistemic injustice. The use of fiction as a methodological tool is well established in the literature: Fricker, for instance, draws on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* to illuminate credibility deficits and racialised patterns of epistemic oppression. More contemporary philosophers argue that imagination can function as a legitimate source of empirical insight, enabling us to explore social possibilities and recognise patterns of injustice that may be obscured in everyday life³⁸. In this sense, Atwood's Gilead operates not as a distant dystopia but as a conceptual laboratory, allowing us to isolate, magnify and analyse the epistemic harms that can (and do) affect societies like our own.

Before turning to the novel, it is necessary to clarify the epistemic mechanisms through which power can erode, distort, or

³⁸ For specific references see Munro Daniel, Liao Shen-yi and Gendler Tamar, "Imagination", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman, Spring 2026

eliminate a subject's capacity to know. The first step is to examine how epistemic injustice operates and how, under certain conditions, it can culminate in what I call cognitive erasure.

1.2 Epistemic injustice as a Mechanism of Cognitive Erasure

This section examines the epistemic mechanisms through which power undermines a subject's capacity to know. By analysing testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, and the broader forms of epistemic violence they enable, we can understand how these harms accumulate into what I call cognitive erasure: the progressive dismantling of a person's epistemic agency.

To clarify the conceptual framework guiding this analysis, I distinguish four related but non-identical phenomena. *Epistemic injustice* (Fricker) refers to credibility deficits and interpretive gaps that wrong individuals in their capacity as knowers. *Epistemic violence* (Dotson) captures the structurally produced failures of communicative reciprocity that prevent marginalized subjects from being heard at even a minimal level. *Epistemicide* (Santos) describes the large-scale destruction of entire knowledge systems under conditions of domination. *Cognitive erasure* is the micro-social counterpart of epistemicide: the gradual overwriting, invalidation, or disappearance of a person's epistemic resources, resulting in the erosion of their epistemic agency.

Cognitive erasure refers to institutional, social and discursive mechanisms that overwrite, delete or render unintelligible to others a subject's experiences, knowledge and epistemic agency. It is a form of epistemic violence that usually involves: denying the subject's capacity

to produce, retain or express knowledge; invalidating the epistemic framework underlying the subject's linguistic acts; making their experience disappear from the subject's own epistemic resources and replacing it with an alternative, imposed interpretation. For instance, a survivor of racial violence may gradually lose the conceptual and social resources to describe their experience as violence at all.

The concept of *epistemicide*, developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos³⁹, describes the systematic destruction of the knowledge of subordinated groups, particularly within colonial processes. If epistemicide operates on a large historical and collective scale, cognitive erasure can be understood as its micro-social manifestation: an everyday form of epistemic destruction that acts on individual subjects. In this sense, cognitive erasure functions as a *miniature epistemicide*, in which a person's experiences and interpretive frameworks are ignored, invalidated, overwritten or rendered within dominant epistemic regimes. For example, a black woman who reports racialized harassment in a workplace where such experiences are routinely dismissed may gradually lose the conceptual and social resources to name what happened to her as harassment at all. Her experience is not only disbelieved, it is epistemically erased, pushed outside the boundaries of what the dominant framework recognizes as real or intelligible.

Before turning to the examples in the novel, it is useful to examine the forms of epistemic injustice that contribute to cognitive erasure. Fricker defines two types of injustice: testimonial injustice, defined as occurring when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word"⁴⁰, a wrong that targets the subject "in their capacity as a giver of knowledge"⁴¹. Her analysis

³⁹ Boaventura, 2014, pg 149 (ebook version)

⁴⁰ Fricker, 2007, pg 12

⁴¹ *ibidem*

shows that this credibility deficit, which is rooted in identity prejudice, such as racism, sexism or homophobia, is often “connected with other types of injustice”, such as economic, political, or educational.⁴² . Therefore, it can be personally devastating for the speaker. In case of testimonial injustice, the subject is unjustly not recognized as a capable epistemic agent, and their testimony is disqualified or *dismissed*. For Fricker, testimonial injustice occurs when the credibility deficit of the speaker arises from two intertwined culpable errors – one epistemic and the other ethical – made by the hearer. The epistemically culpable error is the hearer’s having a belief about the speaker’s competence or sincerity which is unjustified in light of the hearer’s evidence⁴³. The ethically culpable error is the hearer’s giving offence to the speaker in respect of a capacity essential to human value⁴⁴. When one is the object of testimonial injustice, one is degraded as a knower and knowledge giver, so one is degraded as a human.

The second type of injustice defined by Fricker is hermeneutical injustice, a form that occurs when “someone has significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation”⁴⁵. This means that the collective interpretive resources are unevenly shaped by power, leaving certain groups unable to make sense of their own experiences. Hermeneutical injustice is structural: it arises not from one’s person’s prejudice, but from gaps in the shared social imagination. Fricker calls this a “situated hermeneutical inequality”⁴⁶, a condition where marginalized groups lack the interpretative tools needed to understand and communicate their experiences.

⁴² Ivi, pg 27

⁴³ ibidem

⁴⁴ Ivi, pg 35

⁴⁵ Ivi, pg 147

⁴⁶ Fricker, 2007, pg 153

Moving on to theories related to testimonial injustice we find Kristie Dotson's work that expands this framework by showing that testimonial injustice, characterised as above, does not exhaust the ways in which marginalized subjects are silenced. In her *Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing*, she defines epistemic violence as "a failure, owing to pernicious ignorance, of hearers to meet the vulnerabilities of speakers in linguistic exchanges"⁴⁷. Pernicious ignorance⁴⁸ is not a mere absence of knowledge, but a form of structurally produced ignorance that prevents the audience from fulfilling the minimal conditions of communicative reciprocity. The term "minimal conditions" refers to the most basic level of understanding that occurs when we are communicating with someone. For example, when an obese person complains of breathing difficulties to a doctor, the blame is often placed on their weight without conducting the necessary or recommended test that would be performed for someone complaining of the same symptoms but within a healthy weight range. I recommend reading Pearl, R.L., Sheynblyum, M. *How Weight Bias and Stigma Undermine Healthcare Access and Utilization. Curr Obes Rep* 14, 11 (2025) for a clinical and social understanding. It is this systematic failure that generates practices of silencing.

Dotson identifies two types of testimonial oppression. The first is *testimonial quieting*, which occurs when "an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower"⁴⁹. Here the problem is not simply a credibility deficit, but an ontological failure: the speaker is not even recognized as a *possible* source of knowledge. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins, Dotson shows how black women are routinely perceived through a sort of "controlling images" that render them epistemically

⁴⁷ Dotson, 2011, pg 2

⁴⁸ Any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person, Dotson, pg 4

⁴⁹ Ivi, pg 8

disadvantaged and “less likely to be considered competent”⁵⁰. Such stereotypes constitute a form of systematic ignorance that prevents audiences from meeting the speaker’s dependencies and thereby silences her.

The second form is *testimonial smothering*, which Dotson defines as “the fact that one limits oneself to a select audience demonstrates one’s expertise in a specific field”⁵¹. This is a form of coerced self-silencing. It arises when the content of the testimony is *unsafe* or *risky*, when the audience displays testimonial incompetence, and when such incompetence stems from pernicious ignorance. In these situations, the speaker anticipates misunderstanding, distortion or harm, and therefore withholds their testimony. Dotson explicitly describes this as “a type of coerced silencing”⁵², a rational response to an epistemic environment that punishes deviation from dominant interpretive norms.

These two forms of testimonial oppression complicate and deepen Fricker’s account. Whereas Fricker focuses on credibility deficits, Dotson foregrounds the condition of reciprocity as something essential to communication. The exchange of statements becomes a sort of epistemic *pas de deux*, in which the hearer’s willingness to accept or reject what is said determines the very possibility of speaking. Communicative reciprocity requires that the listener interact with the speaker at a minimum level: by recognizing the speaker as a knowledgeable subject, remaining open to the meaning the speaker is trying to convey, and responding in a way that acknowledges the vulnerability inherent in speaking. When harmful ignorance blocks even these basic prerequisites, the dance comes to a halt. The speaker may continue to speak, but the exchange has already broken down;

⁵⁰ Dotson, pg 8

⁵¹ Ivi, pg 10

⁵² ibidem

without reciprocity, their words find no grounding and are effectively silenced.

Indeed, the need to be heard is so deeply rooted in our epistemic lives that when we are deprived of an audience, we invent one. In J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, the Lost Boys sing "*I believe in fairies, I do, I do*" hoping that their words will reach someone who will welcome them. Their voices float in the air, suspended between hope and disappearance, addressed to no real interlocutor but desperately seeking one. This scene captures a fundamental truth: without an audience, speech risks dissolving into a spell, neither fully meaningful nor fully meaningless. Something similar happens in conditions of testimonial oppression. When the speaker is constantly misunderstood, ignored, or forced into self-censorship, their words hover in a liminal space where meaning cannot take hold. What follows is not only a collapse of credibility, but the erosion of the very conditions that make understanding possible. This is the threshold at which testimonial injustice gives way to "hermeneutic disappearance".

Hermeneutic disappearance names the moment when a subject's experiences can no longer be rendered intelligible within dominant interpretive frameworks. Unlike a simple failure of uptake, hermeneutic disappearance reflects a deeper structural impossibility: the conceptual resources required to articulate an experience have been removed, overwritten, or rendered inaccessible. The subject continues to speak but the social world provides no place for their words to land.

To better understand this phenomenon, we can refer to the notion of social structure proposed by Åsa Burman, which can be stated as a member of a collectivity, by virtue of that membership, may have their opportunities as individuals, restricted or enhanced. In a broader sense, we can identify a social structure as a comprehensive

situation of social entities based on their interactions, classifications, and hierarchies, which create certain predetermined actions. A common type of social structure is the school environment, but also a company or even a family. The power dynamics within this structure lead us to the vision of structural power: “An agent A has structural power if and only if there exists a social structure and this affects agent A’s ability to affect certain outcomes”⁵³, which allows us to see how society is shaped by asymmetrical cause-and-effect relationships; those who hold power help to define what counts as knowable and sayable — by determining, for instance school and university’s curricula, publishers and newspapers’ publication policies, and so on — while those who suffer it find themselves excluded from the very possibility of producing meaning.

When structural power determines the boundaries of comprehensibility for those belonging to dominant groups, marginalized subjects are not only disbelieved but rendered hermeneutically impossible. Their experiences cannot be named and their voices cannot be heard by the groups in power. Hermeneutic disappearance thus marks the point at which cognitive erasure becomes total, transforming discourse into something akin to the song of the Lost Boys: an expression suspended for a listener who may never arrive.

In Atwood’s Gilead, cognitive erasure extends across nearly all non-privileged groups, functioning as a systematic dismantling of epistemic agency. Women of every rank are deprived of the conceptual and material tools required for autonomous thought: Wives are restricted to embroidery, Marthas and Econowives to manual labor and Handmaids to reproductive servitude. Men who are not Commanders are similarly confined to roles that require

⁵³Burman Asa, *Non Ideal Social Ontology*, Oxford University Press, 2023, pg 222

obedience rather than reflection. Certain intermediary categories, such as doctors or Aunt, retain limited access to reading and writing, but only insofar as their epistemic labor serves the regime. According to Dotson, this is a complete dismantling of the minimal requirements of communicative reciprocity rather than just a limitation of knowledge. The regime controls who can speak, who can listen and what meanings are permitted. In these circumstances, silencing is the norm in social interactions rather than an occasional wrong.

To prevent any kind of cognitive activity, every “temptation” is kept under control. Signs and banners are replaced by minimalist drawings, understandable of course but without words, books are kept under lock and key and anyone caught reading is severely punished (we see the cutting off of a finger), schools are closed and replaced by the verbal transmission of practical knowledge, each person for their future category.

To understand cognitive erasure, it may be helpful to use Foucault’s theory of power, which can provide us with conceptual tools for analyzing how knowledge is shaped, constrained and produced in power relations.

We know that Foucault argues that power is not just repressive, but also *productive*, as we can read both in *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (1976). Power determines who is authorized to speak, what knowledge is and which forms it has. This suggests that epistemic injustice and cognitive erasure are not merely a failure of communication but a “technology of power” that shapes the epistemic field. Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge is central here: knowledge is never neutral and will be always entangled with power⁵⁴. Cognitive erasure in Gilead is therefore not a mere communicative failure but a technology of

⁵⁴ Foucault Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Pantheon, 1980, pg 189

power/knowledge dichotomy that is intentionally used to produce epistemic invisibility, epistemic impossibility⁵⁵ and epistemic illegibility⁵⁶, a process through which who is in power decides which knowledge lives and which dies.

Cognitive erasure operates through multiple mechanisms like silencing. Silencing is not merely the act of interrupting or ignoring, is the disciplinary normalization of who is allowed to speak and under what conditions, using *epistemic terms* we can say that silencing produce *docile knowers*⁵⁷, which are subjects whose epistemic agency is constrained by power through particular norms of credibility, rationality and property.

With this type of silencing we can connect the form of testimonial oppression introduced by Dotson called testimonial smothering. She describes it as follows:

*In testimonial smothering a speaker smothers her own testimony when an audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence for unsafe, risky testimony owing to pernicious ignorance. When the testimonial content is unsafe and risky, failing to demonstrate testimonial competence to a speaker in a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance is equivalent to a failure to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance.*⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Literally “impossible to do, or state of being impossible” meaning blocking the way of thinking, with or without external forces

⁵⁶ Literally “impossible or almost impossible to read” meaning becoming incomprehensible to anyone. In this case correlated to the intellectual ability to comprehend something

⁵⁷ Slightly inspired by docile bodies, a product of the institution, made by regulating behavior, gesture and speech by Foucault’s terminology in *Surveiller et punir*, 1975

⁵⁸ Dotson, 2011, pg 16

We can try to simplify this by explaining it as the fact that marginalized speakers often self-silences because they anticipate the misunderstanding, this is not a failure of courage, but a rational response to a disciplinary regime that punishes epistemic deviance, like, for example, a Handmaid who has suffered violence will not disclose it to a Commander or a Wife, knowing that her testimony will not be understood, or worse, will be used against her.

Another mechanism that we can find in cognitive erasure is the conceptual annihilation that occurs when dominant epistemologies overwrite marginalized ones. Santos describes this as the “monoculture of scientific knowledge”⁵⁹ which delegitimized alternative epistemologies such as the polytheistic and naturalistic culture of Native Americans, the animistic culture of Africans on the slave route. Marginalising these epistemologies is damaging because it eliminates entire ways of understanding the world, narrowing what counts as knowledge to a single, dominant framework. This type of monoculture does not merely privilege one epistemology, it actively erases others, treating indigenous or animistic as irrational or backward. This erasure has concrete consequences: it strips communities of the intellectual traditions that sustain their identities, histories and relationships to and; it delegitimises their modes of reasoning and problem solving and it renders their experiences unintelligible within the dominant order.

Gilead enacts a similar monoculture: all religious traditions other than its own biblical fundamentalism are erased, criminalized or punished. Islam, Judaism and other Christian denominations are reframed as backward or blasphemous, their practices rendered epistemically impossible within the new order.

⁵⁹ Santos, 2014, pg 277 (ebook version)

Through these mechanisms, Gilead becomes a laboratory of cognitive erasure: a world in which meaning is centrally regulated, epistemic agency is stratified and hermeneutic disappearance becomes the everyday condition of life for the marginalized. If epistemic injustice describes how individuals are wronged as knowers, cognitive erasure shows what happens when these wrongs accumulate and solidify. Taken together, these forms of injustice reveal how credibility deficits, interpretive gaps, and structurally produced ignorance can converge to erase a subject's epistemic presence. To understand how such erasure becomes possible on a broader scale, we must now turn to the mechanisms through which power silently shapes what can be known in the first place.

The next step is to understand how power produces these conditions: not through overt coercion, but through subtle, silent forms of epistemic manipulation that shape what can be known, said, or even imagined.

1.3 Silent Violence: Power, Propaganda and the Manipulation of Knowledge

If epistemic injustice affects individuals, this section shifts the focus to the broader structures that make such injustice possible. Here, I analyse how power operates not through overt coercion but through subtle, silent forms of epistemic manipulation—reshaping the circulation of information, the availability of concepts, and the very conditions under which knowledge can emerge.

To deepen the analysis of testimonial injustice, it is useful to return to Fricker's definition and examine its internal structure.

Testimonial injustice arises from what the hearer thinks of the person who is speaking, and from the prejudices that shape this perception - prejudices grounded not in the speaker's words, but in the social conventions that govern credibility.

Fricker reminds us in *Epistemic Injustice* that "testimonial injustice damages the epistemic system is directly relevant to social epistemologies such as Goldman's 'veritism'⁶⁰, for prejudice presents an obstacle to truth, either directly by causing the hearer to miss out on a particular truth, or indirectly by creating blockages in the circulation of critical ideas"⁶¹. Yet what concerns us here is not the systemic epistemic harm, nor the institutional consequences, but the *immediate wrong* inflicted on the speaker. This wrong has a dual structure: it inflicts a primary harm rooted in the injustice itself, and a secondary harm that arises from its epistemic dimension - one operating at the social level, the other at the cognitive level. Furthermore those who are victims of testimonial injustice tend to lose confidence in their beliefs or justifications, to the point of being unable to maintain the conditions that make them possessors of knowledge.

As Fricker observes, "the fact that the primary injustice involves insult to someone in respect of a capacity essential to human value [the capacity to be a knower] lends even its least harmful instances a symbolic power that adds a layer of harm of its own: the epistemic wrong bears a social meaning to the effect that the subject is less than fully human"⁶². The injury is therefore twofold. On one hand, there is the *epistemic degradation* that undermines the person's standing as a knower; on the other hand, a form of *social dehumanization* that

⁶⁰ a theory in social epistemology asserting that the fundamental goal of inquiry, and the primary measure of epistemic value, is the attainment of true beliefs and the avoidance of false ones. It evaluates social practices, institutions, and communication systems based on their tendency to produce this "veritistic" value

⁶¹ Fricker, 2007, pg 43

⁶² ibidem , pg 44

publicly marks them as deficient in a capacity tied to human worth. This possibility of being exposed to public devaluation - especially in front of others - produces a profound and lasting humiliation, amplifying the original injustice through its social reverberations.

However, we must also say that power does not merely regulate actions; it shapes the very conditions under which knowledge is produced, recognized and circulated. Concepts such as testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, and conceptual silencing, reveal how marginalized groups are systematically prevented from participating in shared meaning-making processes.

We can refer to the idea of *conceptual* silencing as the moment when the speaker is not really unable to perform a speech act, but is unable to form or express *certain* concepts because they lack the conceptual terminology, the necessary resources, or the clarity required to articulate certain experiences.

This discussion would open the door to Austin's theories of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, but I will address those in the next section, in relation to the necessary sociolinguistic analysis. For now, it's needed to focus on the aspects of power, domination, institution and propaganda, while keeping in mind that these two sections should be imagined as closely connected.

Conceptual silencing harms individuals by preventing self-understanding, blocking communication or undermining epistemic agency⁶³.

But how does conceptual silencing connect to testimonial injustice? Generally we can say that testimonial injustice causes and reinforces conceptual silencing, because the two can work together to diminish an individual's capacity for conceptual articulation, minimizing their intellectual output and increasing their

⁶³ Medina José, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pg 89

self-censorship, thereby disproportionately reinforcing the need for silence. At the same time, they can encourage the dominant group to block the recognition of more and more concepts, so that even when the concept exists and is known, it is refused recognition - a distorted situation in which two people speak the same language, but one of them hears Esperanto⁶⁴ instead of English.

Thinking about the novel, we can see how this systematic and conceptual silencing is also linked to political tools and propaganda. In the specific case of Gilead, there is a precise and deep-rooted control over the circulation of information. Access is limited to a very few members of society, who are tasked with reporting everything necessary to the masses.

The narrator tells us that Serena Joy, the Wife, often leaves the TV on while waiting for her husband for the Ceremony, thus allowing OfFred, the Marthas and Nick to watch the news and hear what's going on. Once a month, they therefore have pseudo-direct access to the information conveyed by the government.

Two clarifications are necessary in this case: first, the news is actually public, but many people do not have the luxury of being able to afford a television, which is why they almost never see it and wait for Sunday narratives or public rallies to catch up; second Serena has a rebellious nature. We are immediately told that she does not live her new reality with serenity, even though she contributed greatly to creating it. Perhaps this is why she so often breaks the rules.

In this type of situation, we can see the regime's need to block information. OfFred herself, when describing the capture of rebels by the Guardian Angels⁶⁵, soldiers employed on the front line to defend

⁶⁴ Esperanto is an invented and auxiliary language. The vocabulary is based on words from other languages, mostly romanian, germanic and slavic. The creator Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof dreamt of the possibility to improve the intercultural understanding between people of different origin.

⁶⁵ Atwood Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vintage, 1996, pg 89

the homeland, imagines that they are all actors, ready to play the role of the saviors.

The second most widespread channel of information is gossip, rumors circulating among people who are not taken into account: the Marthas. As domestic workers, they know every detail of the house where they work, every little thing out of place and every kind of movement. Their range of action may extend across streets, neighborhoods, perhaps even entire cities. In a situation where leaving the cities where one lives is practically impossible, one falls back into the sphere where the places one is in become one's global village⁶⁶.

The ability to strategically shape, filter, and distort the circulation of information is one of the most important mechanisms of power today: control over information does not only regulates the organization of daily life, but also penetrates the very processes through which individuals form their beliefs, interpret social reality, and orient their emotional responses. By calibrating the distribution of narratives and affective signals, political actors can channel emotions such as anger, fear, sadness or hope toward specific goals, thus constructing a highly effective apparatus of persuasion. This apparatus works not only designating enemies and allies, but also by prescribing the normative frameworks within which subjects are required to act, judge, and imagine the political world. In this sense, propaganda operates as a technology of subject formation: it produces the categories through which individuals understand themselves and

⁶⁶ Marshall McLuhan, a scholar of mass communications, in 1964, in his essay *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, analyzed how the advent of electronics brought about changes in the way humans live. In a philosophical sense, the oxymoronic term "global village" can be understood as the factor whereby the gigantic globe in which we live, connected on all sides, has in effect been reduced to something as easily explorable as a small village, thereby eliminating the concept of borders. In our case, reference is made to the other side of this oxymoronic hill, where the absence of borders and the excess of globalizations have led to the social closure of the village.

others and organizes the affective economy that sustains political loyalty.

Within this broader dynamic, religious texts, particularly those with long-standing cultural authority, can be mobilized as powerful rhetorical tools. To understand how propaganda mobilizes authoritative discourses, it is useful to examine how certain texts acquire a privileged epistemic status - text whose authority can be invoked, appropriated, or manipulated to shape collective meaning. Religious texts, and the Bible in particular, offer a paradigmatic example of a discourse whose authority is both absolute and disembodied, making it uniquely susceptible to political instrumentalization. On one hand, the Bible speaks with the force of a clearly defined authority: divine, transcendent, and therefore indisputable. On the other hand, the absence of a single embodied spokesperson allows this authority to be appropriated, inhabited and interpreted by a wide range of charismatic individuals in the public sphere. This duality creates fertile ground for political instrumentalization: the authority of the text becomes a portable resource, available to any actor capable of presenting themselves as its legitimate interpreter. The first example illustrates a legitimate mediation of divine authority, where the spokesperson aligns with the epistemic content of the message.

In the Bible we have two examples of the political use of God's voice through third parties. The first is (supposedly) truly conveying the real will of God, who speaks through Moses to free Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, at the time under the control of Pharaoh Ramses II. Moses is not initially believed, neither by the pharaoh, who did not believe in the Jewish God, nor by his own people, who did not see Moses as the true messenger of God. Yet he perseveres precisely because of his faith. This is the relevant passage in the Bible:

and thou shalt say unto him, The Lord God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and, behold, hitherto thou wouldest not hear. Thus saith the Lord, In this thou shalt know that I am the Lord: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. And the fish that is in the river shall die, and the river shall stink; and the Egyptians shall loathe to drink of the water of the river. And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone⁶⁷.

A passage like this can be, and likely was, used in several contexts of real life to justify and legitimize Moses' actions as being willed by God. The second example shows the opposite dynamic: the appropriation of divine authority for the purposes of delegitimization. Both examples can be seen as forms of epistemic manipulation that anticipates modern propaganda. In the second example, it is said that those who exploit the voice of God for their own purposes are ultimately punished. The example can be used, and probably has been used in real-life contexts, as a warning and to delegitimize "false prophets". In the kingdom of Zedekiah, the subjects of Judah are yielding to Babylonian pressure, war is raging, and the people are weary. Jeremiah has long said that falling into Babylonian hands is inevitable, but no one wants to listen. Hananiah enters the scene with a hopeful

⁶⁷ Exodus, 7, 16-19, at the link <https://www.onlinebible.online/read/kjv/exodus/7>

prophecy that the people will defeat the Babylonians within two years, finally freeing themselves from the yokes of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah knows that this is false, but he does not attack Hananiah directly, saying only that it would be very comforting if this were so, but prophets give truth, not consolation. To prove his version, Hananiah breaks the wooden yokes that Jeremiah carries on his shoulders to spectacularize with a grotesque move, his prophecy, causing Jeremiah to leave the city. God addresses Jeremiah, ordering him to return to help the people of Judah. Confirming God's power, Hananiah dies within the year, confirming his role as a false prophet without God's benevolence⁶⁸. These contrasting episodes reveal how the authority of a sacred text can be mobilized either to legitimize or delegitimize views or actions. This structure of appropriated authority is not confined to religious history; it reappears in modern political propaganda, where leaders, institutions, and media figures position themselves as custodian of higher truth.

Such a configuration exemplifies what theorists of power and discourse have described as the circulation of *authoritative scripts* that can be reactivated in different contexts to legitimize specific political projects. The indeterminacy of the biblical voice allows political leaders, preachers, or media personalities to position themselves as vehicles of a higher mandate. In this way, religious authority becomes a portable resource, available to any actor capable of presenting themselves as its legitimate interpreter. The result is a powerful fusion of epistemic and affective control. In this light, the use of the Bible in political communication should not be understood simply as rhetorical embellishment, but as a strategic use of a discursive tradition capable of shaping epistemic environments. It contributes to the construction of a worldview in which certain

⁶⁸ Jeremiah, 28, 1-17, at the link <https://www.onlinebible.online/read/kjv/jeremiah/28>

interpretations appear self-evident, certain actors appear naturally legitimate, and some political actions appear morally necessary. By stabilizing these interpretative frameworks, religious discourse becomes an integral part of the broader mechanism through which collective beliefs, emotions, and identities are governed.

As said, this structure of appropriated authority is not confined to religious history; it reappears in modern political propaganda, where leaders and institutions position themselves as custodians of higher truth. Propaganda is not just a communication strategy aimed at persuasion, it is a sophisticated form of epistemic intervention that reshapes the conditions under which knowledge is produced, recognized and disseminated as legitimate. A striking contemporary example is the decades-long campaign by the tobacco industry, which systematically manufactured doubt about the health risks of smoking. Through sponsored research, selective dissemination of data, and the strategic framing of scientific uncertainty, these corporations did not merely influence public opinion—they reengineered the epistemic environment itself. By controlling which forms of evidence counted as credible and which interpretations were permissible, they narrowed the field of intelligibility in ways that protected their interests and obscured harm. Contemporary theorists of epistemic injustice and ideology have increasingly emphasized that propaganda operates not just at the level of belief formation but also at a deeper level of hermeneutical and conceptual resources. In this sense, propaganda can best be understood as a technology of power that engineers the epistemic environment, structures interpretive possibilities, and consolidates social hierarchies by manipulating the frameworks through which individuals and groups makes sense of the world. It is precisely this capacity to reshape epistemic authority that Janson

Stanley identifies as central to propaganda's epistemic engineering⁶⁹, a process through which political actors can shape the information and the environment in order to influence people, their beliefs and how to hold these beliefs. We can say that propaganda doesn't simply spread falsehood in public discourse but it restructures the epistemic terrain itself, altering the norms of credibility, the conceptual categories available for interpreting social reality and the distribution of epistemic authority.

This engineering operates through several interconnected mechanisms:

A. *Conceptual distortion*: Propaganda often works by distorting the meaning of fundamental political and moral concepts. Terms such as *freedom*, *terrorism*, *patriotism* and *security* can be redefined in ways that serve specific ideological purposes. This distortion is not merely semantic; it reshapes the evaluation of the landscape, making certain political positions appear natural, morally required or necessary. Through Stanley's analysis, we can see how propaganda often relies on *loaded language*⁷⁰ that introduces *normative* assumptions through seemingly *descriptive* terms, thus guiding interpretation without explicit argumentation - as in the political use of expressions like "law and order", which appear neutral but implicitly frame certain groups as threats and punitive state power as self-evidently justified.

B. *Delegitimization of knowledge source*: propaganda also functions by undermining the credibility of certain epistemic

⁶⁹ Stanley Jason, *How Propaganda Works*, Princeton University Press, 2015, pg 48

⁷⁰ Refers to linguistic expression whose surface meaning appears descriptive, but which smuggle in evaluative, ideological or emotional content. Usually used to describe language that does not merely describe a state of affairs but pushes the audience toward a particular interpretation of that state of affairs.

agents of institutions. This delegitimization is a form of testimonial injustice in Fricker's sense, it reduces the credibility of certain speakers based on identity or political convenience, amplifies existing social prejudice, reinforcing stereotypes about gender, race, class or nationality narrowing the epistemic fields, making it more difficult for individuals to access countervailing information; this amplification contributes to the reproduction of structural inequalities by embedding them within the epistemic fabric of society.

C. *Environmental Saturation*: propaganda operates by saturating the epistemic environment with specific narratives and affective cues. This saturation is not merely informational but affective, it shapes the emotional dispositions through which individuals engage political content and make interpretations. Stanley notes how repeated exposure to emotionally charged imagery - such as constant media loops of crime footage or images of national threat - creates a background atmosphere of fear and vigilance that predisposes audiences to accept certain political conclusions as self-evident. In this way, saturation works not through argument but through the steady cultivation of an affective climate that guides interpretation before reasoning even begins.

One of the most profound effects of propaganda is its capacity to exercise conceptual control. Foucault's notion of *regimes of truth*⁷¹ helps illuminate how propaganda establishes and maintains conceptual control by building a regime in which certain statements are authorized as true, as legitimate. This regime is not openly

⁷¹ Foucault, 1975, 1st chapter analysis

imposed from above, but produced through networks, institutions and practices that shape the epistemic field.

Atwood's Gilead replicates this mechanism by grounding its political order in a selective, distorted, and strategically deployed reading of Scripture. We can notice this detail in the novel when Offred tells us about the time *before*, how things changed slowly, piece by piece without anyone (or almost anyone, as we see groups of rebels and resistance fighters, including the protagonist's mother, a sort of second feminist movement) noticing. The example of propaganda we see is the fall of the government. Following the coup in which the President and the entire Congress are killed, the Constitution is suspended. Here is the relevant passage:

That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction⁷².

We can see that, perhaps due to shock, perhaps due to disbelief, the reaction to what should be one of the most politically shocking things that could happen is simply this: the population stands still, even in a climate that is already described as tense. The situation has in fact reached the climax that will lead to its total doom, but things have not been the same for at least a year. So, why is a population that, to varying degrees, has been fighting against injustice for some time now, standing by and watching its own government explode and martial law descend upon them like an axe? The answer lies in the vision that the Sons of Jacob, this religious conservative restoration movement that we see gaining more and more seats in government

⁷² Atwood, 1996, pg 179

and, in times of need, taking on this critical post-coup management, decide to administer to the citizenry. In the USA of an undefined past, I remind you that the book has no time references except at the end, but we can imagine it to be contemporary with the time of writing this paper (2020s), The blame for the bombs that destroyed the US Congress, causing the collapse of the state and the imposition of martial law, was placed on the Islamic Republic, a new superpower that encompasses all the countries of the Islamic Middle East, and their anti-American vision.

This seems credible if we consider the current history of wars linking the United States with islamic republic, and it is precisely for this reason that the lie works.

As we will see in the next section, a plain lie is difficult to sustain, but a mere *modification* of the truth is perfect for installing doubt and rumination in people, which makes the modification a fire of unfounded theories. This dynamic resonates with Medina's epistemology of ignorance, since it is in the best interest of propaganda to maintain a state of ignorance among the population to be controlled, bearing in mind that "ignorance" here does not mean a total absence of knowledge, but rather a skilful reformulation of how things are learned, explained and narrated, and how one can resist with all one's might to keep out knowledge that must not enter.

Taken together, these analyses reveal that propaganda is a multifaceted technology of epistemic power. It engineers the epistemic environment, exercises conceptual control, and produces injustice on multiple levels. It shapes not only what people believe, but how they interpret the world, whom they trust and which experiences they can articulate. Understanding propaganda as epistemic manipulation allows us to see it not as a peripheral feature of political life, but as a central mechanism through which power operates. It is a

form of governance that acts on the level of knowledge, meaning and interpretation, shaping the very possibility of critical thought and democratic agency.

These mechanisms show that power does not merely distort knowledge; it constructs the epistemic environment itself. When this environment is shaped to restrict meaning, credibility, and interpretation, the effects inevitably surface in linguistic exchanges.

If power can manipulate the circulation of knowledge, it can also shape the very conditions under which speech becomes meaningful. The next section examines what happens when this manipulation reaches the level of linguistic interaction, producing situations in which subjects speak but are not heard, or cannot be heard at all.

1.4 The Pragmatics of Not Being Heard

“Yes, we are very happy, I murmur. I have to say something. What else can I say?”⁷³.

This section explores the linguistic and pragmatic dimensions of epistemic harm. When power reshapes the epistemic environment, it also alters the conditions under which speech acts succeed or fail. Here, I analyse what it means to speak without being heard, focusing on failures of uptake, illocutionary disablement, and the forms of silencing that arise when interpretive resources are distorted or denied.

To say that someone is not heard, is not to describe a failure of acoustics. It is to diagnose a social and epistemic condition in which a speaker's words fail to generate an uptake, fail to be recognized as a

⁷³ Atwood, 1996, pg 35

reliable source of knowledge or to be intelligible within the conceptual resources of a community.

The first step is to distinguish, from an epistemic point of view, the difference between listening and active understanding. A listener may hear the sound of a voice, yet still fail to grasp what those words mean within the conceptual framework required for successful testimony. Fricker's account of testimonial injustice makes this clear: a speaker can be audibly heard but not recognised as an authoritative source. This is even more evident in cases of what Fricker calls *conceptual* or *hermeneutical* testimony, where the hearer lacks—or refuses to engage with—the very concepts needed to make sense of what is being said. In such situations, the failure is not merely one of attention but of uptake: the speaker offers meaning, but the hearer is unable or unwilling to inhabit the conceptual space that would allow understanding to occur.

Take, for example, a woman who reports violence. If her interlocutor dismisses everything by saying that she is “exaggerating”, she has been heard in a literal sense, but epistemically speaking, there has been no listening and her words have not produced testimony. For this reason, we can say that not being heard is actually being denied epistemic recognition⁷⁴.

Being heard means being recognised as active and authoritative participants in the epistemic community in which we are immersed. Medina defines epistemic recognition as the social recognition through which a person becomes credible, competent and a relevant expert. When this recognition is lacking, the speaker becomes epistemically invisible. This type of invisibility cannot be defined as accidental, but is traced and outlined as a pattern generated by a consequence of being identified as someone belonging to

⁷⁴ Medina, 2015, pg 89

subcategories such as race, gender disability, or other categories of social powerlessness. In this case, not being heard is not a result of individual prejudice but a structured factor in the distribution of credibility. For every group that is automatically granted epistemic authority, there is typically another that is discredited.

I would like to analyse the idea of conceptual and systemic silencing by first conducting a linguistic analysis. We must begin by saying that, linguistically, our mode of expression is words, expressed in sentences. A sentence can be identified by the presence of a predicate - an expression that attributes a property to something or establishes a relation between elements. In technical terms this means assigning a variable property P to a subject, or specifying a relations between two or more variables $P+P$ ⁷⁵. In this broader sense, *sentence*, refers to any linguistic construction that performs this basic function of predication.

Leaving aside the purely technical question, we can move into the semantic field, considering it the first bridge connecting linguistic science and philosophical science. As a preliminary step, we can use the two semantic components we need, namely *signifier* and *signified*. First, we introduce the signifier, also known as expression, which is the actually perceptible form of the linguistic sign, for example, the word **cat** in its literal composition that is formed by the letter c-a-t on the page or by its pronunciation⁷⁶. We then introduce the definition of signified, the information conveyed by a sign or linguistic element (written or spoken per se)⁷⁷, but I want to specify that this is a simplified definition, useful for the purpose of this analysis, for greater understanding, please refer to the specific book.

⁷⁵ Berruto G., Cerutti M. *La Linguistica: Un corso introduttivo*, UTET, 2011, pg 131

⁷⁶ Ivi, pg 7

⁷⁷ Ibidem

With these two clear elements in mind, we can connect to the philosophy of language, which elevates the concept of semantic analysis provided by the signified, leading us to analyze the social vision of the world and, in this case, its epistemic function.

The social philosophy of language is a discipline that lies at the crossroads between the philosophy of language, social philosophy and political philosophy, with a strong focus on feminist philosophy⁷⁸. Its aim is to analyze non-ideal contexts, highlighting the persecution of the divergent or conflicting goals of different individuals and how they are rarely on the same social level. Through the use of a conscious social philosophy of language, it is demonstrated that words are not 'just words' but methods of reinforcement for social categories and hierarchies: they can therefore be identified as tools of subordination and oppression or as devices of resistance.

The social action that best identifies this dichotomy is propaganda. In the philosophy of language, it is analyzed not only as a type of deceptive communication but also as a discursive practice that actively influences the conditions of meaning. It acts not only on the content of the statements expressed but also on the rules that determine what can be said, what is understood and recognized as true. It is an operation on language even before it is on ideas, restructuring the pragmatic and semantic field within which speakers interpret the world. From a pragmatic perspective, propaganda is a set of linguistic acts that produce normative effect: it does not describe reality but establishes it by interpreting certain statements as natural, necessary or morally inevitable, with the aim of producing ambiguity and suspending critical debate by using simple but ritualistic and constantly repetitive language. A linguistic act is any act we perform by using language. When we speak, we are not only producing sounds

⁷⁸ Bianchi Claudia, Caponetto Laura, *Filosofia Sociale del Linguaggio*, Laterza, 2025, pg 10 ebook version

or sentences, we are doing things - promising, ordering, naming. For Austin, every utterance involves three layers:

- *Locutionary act*: what is said
- *Illocutionary act*: the action that is done by speaking
- *Perlocutionary act*: the effect that is produced.

One widely used element is the redefinition of terms. Propaganda does not necessarily introduce new concepts, but rather re-semanticizes existing ones by shifting their boundaries and flooding them with specific values. In this process, words are no longer tools for comparison but become labels for maintaining a symbolic order, as described in Atwood's novel, in which language is the primary tool of subordination.

Within the philosophy of language, propaganda can be interpreted as the systematic practice of acts of subordination and illocutionary silencing: it does not only operate by transmitting ideas but also intervenes in the real power of linguistic acts.

Acts of subordination come into play when language assigns asymmetrical roles to speakers. Some voices are identified as bearers of truth or rationality, while others are reduced to opinions, emotionality, or deviance. This definition of hierarchy does not necessarily occur through explicit command, but can be expressed through impersonal formulas, shared assumptions, or semantic frames that make discursive inequality natural, resulting in certain speakers speaking from a position of disadvantage from the outset.

Illocutionary silencing occurs in a gap between utterance and recognition. The subject may articulate grammatically correctly, but their speech acts do not have the effect they should have. The word is spoken, but the act fails because of the social and linguistic conditions of the person uttering it, who has an anticipatory negation⁷⁹ meaning

⁷⁹ Bianchi, Caponetto, 2025, pg 176 ebook version

a pragmatic strategy through which a speaker pre-empts potential misinterpretations.

Propaganda exploits and reinforces these mechanisms by establishing which linguistic acts are legitimate and which are not; it produces a discursive order in which dissent is not openly censored but rendered ineffective. What is at stake is not simply the “value” of words in a vague sense, but their illocutionary force—their capacity to function as assertions, questions, orders, declarations, or expressions within a shared normative space. When propaganda reshapes this space, certain utterances lose their recognisable force: a protest no longer counts as a protest, a question no longer counts as a genuine request for information, a declaration no longer carries institutional weight. In such a regime, it is not necessary to prevent someone from speaking; it is enough to ensure that their speech acts no longer “take effect.” Silence becomes not the absence of voice but the structural outcome of a linguistic environment that neutralises and empties the very act of speaking. Recognising this dynamic means expanding the framework beyond epistemic injustice strictly understood, which focuses primarily on discriminations affecting *assertive acts* (testimony). Propaganda shows that power also shapes what can be asked, ordered or expressed, producing forms of injustice that concern the full spectrum of illocutionary acts. What is undermined, therefore, is not only a speaker’s credibility as a knower but their broader pragmatic agency, their ability to perform meaningful linguistic actions within a shared social world.

In Gilead dystopia, power is exercised decisively through the control of words. The regime does not merely regulate behaviour but intervenes directly in language, reducing access to vocabulary, rigidifying forms and restricting their use. Lexical control is a central device of government. Proper names are replaced by functional and

possessive designations, which redefine identity in terms of belonging and role. Mandatory ritual forms are introduced, removing the possibility of spontaneous speech and suppressing the expressive value of thought. As a result, all words related to choice, desire and autonomy are eliminated, expelled or rendered unpronounceable: what can be named cannot be thought and therefore claimed. Added to this is the systematic use of impersonal and passive structures, which conceal the agent of power. Decisions “happen”, punishments “are necessary” and rules “must be established”. In this way, violence is not presented as an exercise of political will but as an effect of a natural or divine order, as in the case of the theocracy of Gilead. In Gilead, linguistic oppression can be observed on different levels⁸⁰. A first level derives from the names, roles such as Handmaid, Wife, Martha, Aunt, do not describe individuals but functions, linguistically anticipating the reduction of human beings (women, in this case) to their sole use for society. Proper names are replaced by possessive formulas, transforming their existence and identity into belonging to someone else, becoming *his* linguistic extension.

A second level concerns mandatory ritual formulas, such as codified greetings and necessary responses. Analysing two of the most commonly used forms, we find the greeting, *Blessed be the fruit / May the Lord open it*: this greeting is used almost exclusively towards the Handmaids, who may also use it among themselves (it is in fact one of the few expressions allowed to the Handmaids). This custom does not establish a relationship between the two speakers; instead, it reaffirms their biological function of reproduction, making every type of linguistic interaction a reminder of the subordination given by their role. The contrast is noticeable when Wives, Aunts and Commanders exchange farewells with everyday formulas such as *Good morning* or

⁸⁰ Spadolini Eleonora, *The Action of Language: an Analysis of The Handmaid's Tale*, Mittuniversitetet, 2025

Have a nice morning. In this case, the act of speaking does not only mean choosing what to say, but also demonstrating adherence, continuously repeating the intention to empty words of their meaning and make speech conform to the will of power.

Even more insidious is the use of impersonal phrases and automatic expressions. Phrases such as *it's necessary*, *it's said*, eliminate all kinds of human agency from the decision: no one seems to choose or impose anything, each agrees to follow an imposed command. A striking example is the automatic response *Praise Be*, which does not bring real content but only echo, the speech act does not produce new meaning, but certifies alignment. On one hand, we speak only for given formulas, on the other we mask imposition, circumventing the conflict even before it happens. In this way Gilead shapes the way power is perceived, not as violence but as an inevitable order, uttered by the voice of No One⁸¹.

Making individuals incapable of performing speech acts is not only preventing them from speaking but is emptying their words of effectiveness. A subject is rendered linguistically incapable when he can no longer carry out acts such as promising, protesting or denouncing. Language is available as sound and production but does not have the ability to act or function correctly semantically.

This inability is produced by directly intervening on the conditions of happiness of speech acts. For an illocutionary act to be considered successful, social recognition, the speaker's status, and the context that attributes true value to the utterance are needed, a classic example of a successful illocutionary act is *I now pronounce you husband and wife*; institutions can sabotage these elements without using explicit silence; they simply need to systematically deny certain

⁸¹ No one is the entity given all the agency that is taken away from a man because there is a need for the lost agency to be localized in any case in a figure in which to place trust. In a theocratic system trust becomes faith, and the only incontestable subject is God.

speakers the ability to perform certain acts. In this way, the individual is deprived of linguistic strength: he can speak but his words have no value. The protest then becomes lament, the request insolence. The failure of the act is not accidental but structural, a symbolic form of deactivation that makes material repression superfluous⁸².

In Gilead, women are not only limited in speech but are rendered completely incapable of performing relevant speech acts. A handmaiden can describe pain but not report it, she can formulate a sentence but without accusations or testimony, her statements have no context that recognizes them as valid.

When a handmaid attempts to express dissent, her words fail not because they are false or uninformative, but because they are not recognised as the kind of illocutionary act she is attempting to perform. Within Gilead's hierarchy, dissent is not an act that a handmaid is socially entitled to perform, so her utterance is reclassified as a breach of role rather than as a meaningful contribution. In this sense, the failure does not concern testimony or credibility—there is no evaluation of her as a knower—but the collapse of illocutionary force itself. What is denied is her capacity to perform certain speech acts (to protest, to refuse, to object), not her capacity to assert truths. This moves us beyond epistemic injustice strictly speaking and into the domain of pragmatic injustice, where power determines which illocutionary acts a speaker is allowed to perform and which are structurally blocked. No explicit silencing is required: the social order ensures that her words cannot “take effect,” emptying the act of speaking from within. The prohibition of writing and reading also serves not only to limit information but also to effectively remove a wide range of illocutionary abilities; without access to public linguistic forms, it is impossible to perform acts or leave any effective linguistic

⁸² Katharine Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression. Race, gender and social reality*, Oxford University Press, 2023

traces. What is lost is not merely the capacity to assert propositions, but the broader repertoire of pragmatic actions that depend on literacy, these include issuing directives, making declarations, undertaking commitments or submitting questions to institutions. In this sense, the harm is not epistemic injustice strictly speaking, but a form of pragmatic injustice, where the social and material conditions required for illocutionary force are systematically dismantled⁸³.

Speech silence concerns the elementary level of the speech act, that is, the impossibility of materially producing certain utterances. It can be imposed physically (caesura, punishment or interdiction) or in a regulatory manner (taboo, prohibited words or formal restrictions). In this case the subject is not silenced because he says something inappropriate or false but because he is not allowed to say that specific thing.

Locutionary silence affects the availability of the linguistic code, reducing the accessible lexicon or permitted structures. It is not only preventing communication but weakening the sayable field with direct effects on the articulation of complex or alternative concepts.

Illocutionary silence, on the other hand, is more subtle. Here the subject can speak but the statements are not received for their main value: they are therefore not valid acts. The act fails, therefore, not because of a lack of form but because of a lack of recognition. In Gilead, locutionary silence is imposed systematically, with women prohibited from reading and writing, thus limiting not only information but also the actual construction of statements. Alongside this, the illocutionary silence works, which sees the handmaids talking to each other, but their words are acts that are not socially relevant. They can produce sounds, exchange sentences, even share experiences, but within Gilead's normative order these utterances lack

⁸³ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1962

illocutionary uptake. What circulated among them is therefore not recognised as participation in the public space of action, but as mere background noise of a subordinated role. Their speech is structurally confined to a domain where it cannot *do* anything: it cannot challenge, demand, accuse, or declare. In this sense, the silence is not the absence of speech but the absence of socially acknowledged illocutionary force, a condition in which speaking becomes indistinguishable from not speaking at all.

The recognition of a statement is an essential condition for its effectiveness. A speech act succeeds not only because it is spoken correctly, but because it is recognized as what it intends to be. When this recognition is systematically denied or distorted, we witness an oppressive situation of language.

An example of this is illocutionary reversal, where the utterance is not only ignored but reinterpreted with reduced or opposite illocutionary force; the speaker performs the act, but the institution attributes another. The main effect is the impairment of discursive agency: if a subject knows that he or she is considered *unreliable*, his or her capacity to act is eroded. Different illocutionary acts fail for different socially attributed reasons. A person who is not recognised as able to give orders is not treated as unreliable but as lacking authority; a person who is not recognised as able to ask questions is treated as lacking the standing to request reasons; a person whose expressions of emotion are dismissed is treated as lacking responsiveness or sincerity. What these forms of exclusion share is a deeper denial of rational agency—the capacity to participate in the normative space where reasons are exchanged, obligations undertaken, and actions performed through words.

In Gilead, the reception of the feminine word is structurally compromised. Women may speak in certain contexts, but their speech

is devalued beforehand. The implicit idea that women are prone to lying, exaggeration, or moral confusion functions as a constant interpretative filter. When a handmaiden expresses fear, pain, or dissent, her utterance undergoes an illocutionary reversal: what is said as accusation or rejection is perceived as a sign of guilt, weakness, or internal corruption. The word does not fail because it is false or unauthoritative or irrational, but because it is reclassified. The act of testifying is not recognized as such. But this failure goes well beyond testimony. What collapses is not only the speaker's credibility as a witness, but her broader capacity to act through language. When an utterance is not acknowledged as the kind of act it is meant to be, the speaker is not merely suffering witness injustice; she is experiencing a more radical form of agency injustice. Her status as a participant in the normative space of reasons and actions is denied. The harm, therefore, is not restricted to the epistemic domain but concerns the erosion of pragmatic agency itself, meaning the socially recognised ability to perform meaningful acts with words⁸⁴.

Handmaids are not considered reliable sources of knowledge about their own experience. Their word does not contribute to the construction of social knowledge: it is excluded from the outset. As a result, even when they tell the truth, legitimate speakers are not believed. The cumulative effect is the neutralization of discursive agency. Speaking does not change anything, rather it exposes you to further symbolic or material sanctions. The regime does not need to refute women's words: it simply needs to make them not credible by definition. In Gilead, therefore, linguistic oppression reaches a sophisticated level: not only is what is said controlled, but the very form of listening is governed, transforming distorted reception into a systematic tool of domination.

⁸⁴ Bianchi Claudia, *Hate Speech, Silencing, and Pragmatics*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pg 45-52

Governing concepts means establishing what categories are available to describe the world and describe oneself. When subjects are denied the ability to define their reality in their own way, a filter is created through imposed categories that limit their transmissibility and public legitimacy. In this framework, linguistic control is not limited to the regulation of true and false. Power exercises a more radical epistemic authority, deciding who has the right to establish what counts as true, who can speak with normative value, and who, instead, is confined to a subaltern discursive position. Truth does not emerge only from epistemic criteria, but is institutionally administered, along with the distribution of the roles of authoritative speaker and obligate listener. The denial of the right to speak is inseparable from the denial of the right to listen. Even when subjects speak, their words can be systematically neutralized through mechanisms of credibility devaluation, illocutionary reversal, and testimonial injustice. In this way, language loses its function of action: statements do not produce social effects, do not open spaces of contestation, do not modify the existing order. Talking remains possible, but it becomes useless. At this point, the cost of linguistic control becomes evident; when language is monitored, speaking carries a structural risk and anything can have negative consequences. Language thus ceases to be an instrument of expression and becomes a dangerous currency to use with caution. The individual finds himself faced with a double constraint: speaking exposes, remaining silent erases. This cost is not individual but systemic since control produces conformity, reduces the circulation of alternative meanings and impoverishes the collective conceptual horizon. The stability of the order is paid for by the loss of semantic innovation, revision and criticism of the dominant categories. Linguistic oppression is effective because it transfers control over

those who learn to self-censor and anticipate the institution's expectations.

The result is the structural impairment of discursive agency. Subjects are not only deprived of the ability to express themselves freely but also of being recognized as competent linguistic agents. Power therefore dominates not only what is said, but the very conditions under which speaking can have value without becoming a cost. By denying the right to name oneself, to establish meaning, and to be heard without risk, power not only controls discourse but redefines who can exist as a public subject.

When speech fails, the consequences extend beyond the linguistic domain: they reshape how individuals are perceived, interpreted, and ultimately positioned within the social world. The following section examines these consequences by focusing on three interrelated dimensions—credibility, interpretation, and visibility—through which epistemic power determines who counts as a subject and who fades into social invisibility.

1.5 Credibility, interpretation and social invisibility

Building on the previous analyses, this section examines the social consequences of epistemic and pragmatic silencing. Credibility, interpretation, and visibility form a tightly interconnected triad through which power determines who counts as a knower, whose experiences are intelligible, and who becomes socially invisible. The question of how societies distribute credibility, shape interpretation and produce social invisibility is not simply a question of

epistemology but a question of political architecture. Modern power operates not only through coercion or law. It also works through the organization of knowledge, the circulation of meanings and the perceptual habits that determine who appears as a subject.

Credibility, interpretation and visibility constitute the underlying conditions of public life and their distribution is neither random nor neutral. They are structured by history of domination, sedimented in institutions and continuously reproduced through discourse, media and daily interaction. To understand how propaganda and subordination work today, we must begin by recognizing that epistemic practices are among the most powerful tools of social control.

Credibility is often imagined as a rational assessment of reliability, but in practice it is a socially allocated resource. People don't enter communication spaces like a blank slate; they carry the burden of stereotypes, expectations, and inherited narratives that shape how their words are received. A woman who reports harassment, a black citizen who describes police violence - each encounter a credibility deficit that precedes their speech.

Their testimony is filtered through social meanings that pre-emptively mark them as unreliable, the residue of historical subordination. They reflect the long afterlife of patriarchal, racial and colonial hierarchies that have taught societies whose voices matter and those that do not⁸⁵. At the same time, dominant groups enjoy an excess of credibility, their words are granted authority even when they are not supported by evidence. Charles Mills's analysis of white ignorance captures this dynamic precisely: ignorance is not a passive absence of knowledge, but an active and socially produced misperception that protects privilege⁸⁶. Excess credibility protects

⁸⁵ Fricker, 2007, pg 28-29

⁸⁶ Mills Charles, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, pg 17

dominant groups from epistemic challenges, allowing their interpretations to become the default framework through which social reality is understood.

This asymmetry is crucial to maintaining hierarchies, because it ensures that the dominant group's worldview is continually strengthened, while alternative perspectives are discarded before they can take hold⁸⁷. A similar dynamic emerges when we shift from credibility to interpretation. Interpretation is the second axis of epistemic power: interpreting the world is to participate in its construction. Social meanings shape what matters as a problem, what matters as evidence and what matters as harm. When interpretive resources are unevenly distributed, so is the ability to make sense of one's experience. Hermeneutic injustice arises when a group lacks the conceptual tools to articulate its social reality⁸⁸. Before the term *sexual harassment* existed, women suffered pervasive harm they could not name; before *racial profiling* entered public discourse, racialized citizen lacked a shared vocabulary to describe a systematic policing model. These gaps are not random, they reflect the priorities of a society that has historically centered the experiences of dominant groups by marginalizing others.

But interpretation is not just about the availability of concepts; it is also about the authority to define them. Sally Haslanger's work on ideology demonstrates that social meanings are shaped by political interest. Concepts can reveal injustice, but they can also hide it⁸⁹. Terms like *welfare dependency*, *illegal immigrant* or *broken families* don't simply describe social phenomena; they frame them in ways that naturalize inequality and divert attention from structural causes.

⁸⁷ Mill Charles, *White Ignorance in Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, SUNY Press, 2007, pg 20

⁸⁸ Fricker, 2007, pg 147

⁸⁹ Haslanger Sally, *Resisting Reality*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pg 25

Ideology organizes the conceptual field so that some interpretations feel intuitive while other appear implausible or radical⁹⁰. This struggle over meaning becomes even clearer when we consider how speech itself can be impaired. Competing social groups do not merely disagree about facts, they contest the frameworks that determine what counts as a reasonable description, a legitimate concern, or a meaningful objection. Ideology works by naturalizing certain interpretive routes - making them feel obvious, commonsensical⁹¹- while rendering alternative routes unintelligible, excessive, or irrational⁹². In such a landscape, dissenting speech can be neutralized not through overt censorship but through interpretive containment: it is heard as exaggeration, insolence, hysteria, or confusion rather than as critique, protest, or testimony⁹³. The struggle over meaning is therefore inseparable from the struggle over uptake, over whose words are allowed to function as socially effective acts and whose are systematically deprived of illocutionary force⁹⁴. This is where ideology and pragmatic injustice converge: by shaping the conditions under which speech acts “come off,” ideology determines not only what can be said but what speech can do⁹⁵. This is why interpretative power is so central to political struggle: changing the meaning of a concept means changing the social world it organizes.

Social invisibility is the third dimension of epistemic domain. Invisibility is not simply a slack of attention; it is a politically structured absence. Groups become invisible when their experiences,

⁹⁰ Haslanger, 2015, pg 38

⁹¹ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2014. pp. 181–186

⁹² Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage, 1997, pp. 13–36

⁹³ Rae Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, no. 4, 1993, pp 315–322

⁹⁴ Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton, “Free Speech and Illocution,” *Legal Theory* 4, no. 1, 1998, pp 26–31

⁹⁵ Ishani Maitra, “Silencing Speech,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. 2, 2009, pp 320–327

contributions or suffering are systematically excluded from public attention. Invisibility can take the form of perceptual erasure, in which individuals are not seen as subject; discursive erasure in which they do not appear in registers, statistics or archives. Invisibility is often the result of interpretative and credibility deficits, but it also reinforces them. When a group is not represented in the media, is not included in political discussions, is not counted in official data, its absence becomes a justification for further negligence. Invisibility thus becomes self-perpetuating⁹⁶.

The racialized production of invisibility is particularly evident. Mills' account of the racial contract shows how modern states were built on the epistemic erasure of colonized and enslaved people. Their knowledge systems were dismissed as superstition, their histories rewritten or ignored, their humanity denied⁹⁷. This erasure was not incidental; it was a fundamental component of colonial rule.

To govern a population, one must first make it epistemically unreadable. We can say that the same logic persists today in the underrepresentation of racialized groups in the media, the lack of data on police violence, and the persistent framing of racial injustice as an individual rather than a structural problem. Silencing is a crucial mechanism of invisibility. Rae Langton's analysis of illocutionary impairment shows that subordination can prevent speakers from performing the very speech acts they intend. When a woman says "no" and it is not perceived as rejection, she is not simply ignored; she is persuaded not to refuse. His speech fails not because of his words but because of the social conditions that deny his authority⁹⁸. Silence extends beyond gender: racialized, disabled, and queer speakers often see their words misunderstood, ignored, or stripped of authority.

⁹⁶ Hill Collins Patricia, *Black Feminist Thought*, Routledge, 2000, pg 69

⁹⁷ Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, 1997, pg 72

⁹⁸ Langton Rae, *Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts*, Philosophy & Public Affairs 22 n.4, 1993, pg 314

Propaganda exploits all three dimensions of epistemic power. It doesn't just spread falsehoods; it reorganizes the epistemic environment. Jason Stanley argues that propaganda works by manipulating the conditions under which information is evaluated⁹⁹. Assign credibility strategically, amplifying voices aligned with dominant interest and delegitimizing dissent.

It reshapes interpretive frameworks by introducing misleading concepts or reformulating existing ones. And it produces invisibility by omitting certain groups or narratives from public discourse.

Propaganda manipulates credibility by activating pre-existing stereotypes. When propaganda portrays refugees as security threats, it doesn't create mistrust from scratch; it activates latent prejudices that already consider outsiders dangerous. When propaganda paints welfare recipients as lazy, it is based on long-standing narratives of moral failure.

By reinforcing deficits and excesses of credibility, propaganda stabilized the epistemic hierarchies that support social inequality¹⁰⁰. Propaganda introduces or distorts concepts to shape public understanding. The term *superpredator* reframed young black people as inherently violent, legitimizing punitive policies, the phrase *gender ideology* reframes LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to social order, the label *fake news* reframed factual journalism as partisan manipulation. These conceptual interventions don't just mislead, they reorganize the interpretative field so that some explanations become unthinkable¹⁰¹.

Propaganda therefore functions as a form of hermeneutic domination. It produces invisibility through omission. It doesn't need to lie about marginalized groups, it may simply fail to represent them. The absence of certain stories, images or data creates a distorted

⁹⁹ Stanley, 2015, pg 48

¹⁰⁰ Stanley, 2015, pg 63

¹⁰¹ Ivi, pg 57

picture of social reality. When the media rarely shows police violence against racialized citizens, the public perceives it as rare; when disabled people are absent from public debate, their needs appear marginal. Invisibility becomes a tool for maintaining ignorance¹⁰².

The power of propaganda lies in its ability to reshape the epistemic environment without appearing to do so. It does not need to persuade through argument, it can simply reorganise the background assumptions that structure interpretation. Once credibility hierarchies and interpretive frameworks are aligned with dominant interests, propaganda becomes almost invisible, it operates through the taken-for granted. This is why propaganda is most effective when it appears as common sense. When a society has internalised the idea that certain groups are dangerous, irrational, or untrustworthy, propaganda need only gesture toward these stereotypes to activate them. The work of persuasion has already been done by history¹⁰³.

In contemporary philosophy of language, the notions of lying and misleading do not coincide. Lying implies the intention to introduce a mistaken belief, while misleading is the act of a speaker saying something semantically correct by orienting the interlocutor to a distorted and false conclusion, without openly violating the literal truth of the uttered but what is made salient, suggested, or left out of context. From this perspective, the concept of misleading becomes more effective than lying because it exploits immediately, since nothing is really openly false.

In epistemology, this type of communication produces distorted linguistic environments, since it does not introduce individual false beliefs but rather modifies the conditions in which they are formed. Some interpretations become natural, other implausible and other unspeakable.

¹⁰² Mills, 2007, pg 29

¹⁰³ Stanley, 2015, pg 53

The Gilead regime fits perfectly into this mechanism. Gilead's theological propaganda relies on selective use of religious language, with biblical references not distorted but only extracted, isolated and reinserted in a context that provides only one possible interpretation. A central example is the justification for the reduction of handmaidens to a biological function through the story of sisters Rachel and Leah, wives of Jacob, whose myth is not falsified but decontextualized, silencing the narrative character as well as the historical context, transforming an episode into a universal norm¹⁰⁴. The fact that Jacob conceives first only with his devoted sister (Leah) and then with her slave (Bila¹⁰⁵) leads propaganda to connect fertility to devotion, finding in the Wives the figure of the devoted Lia, and in the Handmaids the figure of the silenced Bila. This episode, within Gilead society, is handed down because "written in the scriptures": it is a story perceived as true that becomes the theological foundation of a biological necessity.

The same principle is observed in expressions such as "is the will of God" or "is for your own good", which move the origin of the decision out of human domination, making this norm unassailable, even if described in an apparently benevolent form. Therefore, these statements are not necessarily false but produce a precise implication: if you suffer it is because you do not understand, if you resist you are morally lacking and dissent is interpreted as individual error. The veracity of the statement protects the regime from challenge, because there is nothing explicitly false to expose.

¹⁰⁴ The biblical myth in the book of Genesis tells of Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel, two sisters who were his uncle's daughters. Jacob immediately wanted to marry Rachel, young and beautiful, but as a custom he was given Leah as his wife, older and less bewitching than his sister. Leah, praising the Lord, is nevertheless made fruitful unlike her sister.

¹⁰⁵ Bila, as a slave, is given to Jacob and Leah as property and not as a human being, so her use without consent is equal to that of an object, just like the Handmaids.

In the Gilead case, regime theology is a systematic machine of figleaves. In contemporary debate, the concept of figleaf is used to describe discursive devices that do not modify the moral nature of an action, but alter its public presentability¹⁰⁶. It does not operate on the content of the statement but on the normative framework. Figleaves act as illocutionary acts of moral reformulation. An act that would be considered coercive is linguistically reclassified; this classification changes the appropriateness of criticism, where challenging the act does not mean opposing power, but rejecting the value that justifies it. A clear illustration is the ritualised sexual command imposed on a handmaid: in ordinary moral terms, this is straightforwardly coercion. Yet, within Gilead's ideological vocabulary it is reframed as a duty or a *sacred obligation*. Once the act is redescribed in this way, objecting to it no longer appears as resisting coercion, it appears as resisting piety, obedience and divine orders. The linguistic shift does not alter the nature of the act, but it transforms the social meaning of objecting to it, making criticism seem like a moral deviation rather than a legitimate challenge to domination.

Figleaves work in contexts where certain values have high symbolic authority. Language does not create these values but exploits legitimizing patterns, making figleaves a mechanism of normative parasitization, with a central role in stabilizing power: they do not produce active consensus but reduce the cognitive and moral cost of acceptance. The subordination of women is presented as the protection of purity, reproduction as a necessity. Nothing of this requires an explicit lie but it is enough to wrap the oppressive act in morally unassailable language. The figleaf is not convincing because she explains but because she disarms. The figleaf is precisely in the re-description of the oppressive act in terms that make it appear

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer Saul, *Racial Figleaves, the Shifting Boundaries of the Permissible, and Rise of Donald Trump*, *Philosophical Topics*, vol 45, n.2, pp 97-116

morally justified or even virtuous. It is the linguistic move that covers the coercive nature of the act without altering it.

- “Protection of purity” functions as a moral figleaf: it reframes control over women’s bodies as care, safeguarding, or moral duty.
- “Reproduction as a necessity” functions as a pragmatic figleaf: it reframes forced reproduction as a collective obligation or biological imperative.

In both cases, the figleaf does not change the underlying action (which remains coercive and oppressive). What it changes is the public interpretation of the action. It provides a thin moral cover that allows the speaker to avoid blame and the audience to avoid moral discomfort.

In philosophy of language and social pragmatics, the manipulative use of generics, that is, statements that formulate general statements without specific quantifiers, is recognized as one of the most effective mechanisms of production and stabilization for stereotypes, whose strength lies not only in descriptive precision but also in their controlled indeterminacy. As Sarah-Jane Leslie shows, generics such as *Mosquito carry malaria*, are accepted as true even though they describe behaviours that are statistically rare; their force comes from the impression of generality, not from actual prevalence¹⁰⁷. When applied to social groups, this mechanism becomes even more powerful: a single salient case can license a sweeping generic, which in turns shapes expectations, justifies discriminatory attitudes, and naturalizes social hierarchies. The generic thus functions as a cognitive shortcut that appears informative while silently reinforcing an ideological frame. From a theoretical point of view, generics do not affirm “all” or “most” and therefore escape the ordinary verification

¹⁰⁷ Sarah-Jane Leslie, *Generics and the Structure of the Mind*, Philosophical Perspectives, 2007, pp 381-387

criteria. They are not false in the strict sense, they admit exceptions, but they are not true in the informational sense either.

This ambiguity makes generics pragmatically powerful: listeners spontaneously interpret them as descriptions of stable regularities, even when they are based on minimal evidence. Their form invites the assumption of an underlying essence or natural kind, so that what is merely contingent appears intrinsic. This tendency toward naturalization becomes even more explicit in linguistic essentialism, where generic statements are taken to reveal the inherent properties of a group rather than socially produced patterns.

On the social level, generics operate as acts of naturalization. They transform historical phenomena or situations into the property of groups. Saying a phrase like “women need protection” does not describe a truly existing behavior in a circumscribed way but emphasizes identity factors that we carry with us more by tradition than by real observation. Manipulatory use emerges when generics are interpreted without the possibility of symmetric replication. Those who are subjected to the utterance are forced to defend themselves with individual counterexamples that can be weak because the generic absorbs the exception without changing; the utterance remains intact, while the critical speaker appears to be an anomalous case. A simple illustration is a statement such as “*Handmaids are obedient*”. If a handmaid objects by pointing to her own disobedience, the speaker can reply that she is merely an exception. The generic cannot be symmetrically turned around - she cannot say “*Commanders are disobedient*” with the same pragmatic force, because the social structure does not grant her the authority to generate a counter-generic. The asymmetry ensures that the original claim remains stable, while the attempt to refute it is reabsorbed as deviation rather than contradiction.

Counterexamples, however, play a crucial role if formulated correctly. An effective counterexample is not individual but structural, it does not deny the generic but exposes its epistemic asymmetry. This asymmetry lies in the fact that the generic is treated as if it were grounded in deep, essential features of the group, while any counter-instance is treated as superficial, accidental, or irrelevant. In other words, the generic enjoys a privileged epistemic status whereas the counterexample is interpreted as noise rather than evidence. A structural counterexample works by reversing this hierarchy: it shows that the generic's apparent stability depends on selective attention, uneven authority, and a social context that protects the generalization from falsification. A different possible strategy consists in mirror-image overturning, that is, formulating a generic parallel thus making the arbitrariness of the original visible: the discomfort produced by this overturning signals that the first statement functioned not as a neutral description but as an act of normalized subordination. For instance, if one asserts "*Handmaids are naturally obedient*," a mirror-image generic such as "*Commanders are naturally obedient*" immediately appears absurd or even offensive. This asymmetry is revealing: the first statement passes as descriptive because it aligns with an established hierarchy, while the parallel statement feels unacceptable precisely because it challenges that hierarchy.

When the generic indicates a tendency to conceptualize social categories as if they were natural types with intrinsic properties independent of historical or political context, we fall back into what the philosophy of language defines as essentialism. Linguistically, it occurs when traits, contingents, or roles are presented as an expression of a profound nature. This gives us a self-reinforcing cycle in four phases:

1. Phase one: a category is defined based on a (supposed) essential trait such as *women are naturally emotional*,

2. Phase two: based on the definition, differentiated institutional practices for the category are justified,
3. Phase three: these differentiate practices produce adaptive behaviors consistent with the definition provided in Phase One,
4. Phase four: the behaviors of phase three are read as confirmation of the definitions of phase one.

Language is central to this cycle: it provides the conceptual framework that makes the shift from description to justification almost invisible. Gilead radicalizes this mechanism by grounding its social order in essentialist assumptions.

Essentialism is the symbolic foundation of the entire regime, where women are conceptualized as naturally oriented towards reproduction: expression “motherhood is women's natural destiny” transforms a capacity into an identity.

The self-reinforcing cycle in this environment becomes:

1. Phase one: all women are mothers by nature, in need of care
2. Phase two: women are prohibited from education, knowledge, public speech and decision-making autonomy, because otherwise they would be distracted from their natural end.
3. Phase three: women, now without alternatives, develop addictive and silent behaviors.
4. Phase four: behaviors are read as confirmation of the initial definition, supporting it.

In this way, Gilead does not need to justify itself for its practices, it is enough to reiterate only the essence. Linguistic essentialism closes the circle: what is socially constructed is natural, what is natural becomes incontestable.

These linguistic mechanisms do not just express a hierarchy: they put it into action. A police officer who rejects the testimony of a Black citizen, a judge who doubts a woman's account of the attack, a

doctor who ignores a disabled patient's description of pain — these are not isolated failures, but institutionalized models of epistemic subordination. They define who is considered a credible speaker and whose interpretations are taken seriously. Over time, these acts settle into the structure of social life, creating a world in which certain voices are habitually doubted and others habitually believed¹⁰⁸. When such habitual patterns are taken up, repeated, and stabilized by formal procedures, they may become institutionalised. In these cases, the generic assumptions that once circulated informally are translated into rules, forms, and protocols. A court that rejects testimony, a medical record that omits symptoms, a bureaucratic form that misclassifies identity, these are not simply individual errors but examples of how background generalisations can harden into institutional models of epistemic subordination. Once embedded in documents, these credibility judgments acquire the authority of the institution and a permanence that is difficult to challenge.

The individual who has been misunderstood or misclassified must now fight not only against prejudice but against institutional documentation itself¹⁰⁹. The authority of the institution legitimizes the credibility deficit, and the credibility deficits justifies the authority of the institution.

According to certain philosophers of language, words do not simply describe reality, but actively act on it. The use of speech acts produces a social, institutional and material effect. To say something is always to do something. Oppression, in this perspective, is not only accompanied by language but is *realized* linguistically. Within this framework, Austin's distinction between verdictive and exercitive acts becomes particularly relevant¹¹⁰. In this proposed classification,

¹⁰⁸ Fricker, 2007, pg 44

¹⁰⁹ Haslanger, 2015, pg 367

¹¹⁰ Austin, 1962

verdictive and exercitive acts are two fundamental illocutionary acts through which institutional power can be exercised¹¹¹. In his work, Austin provides the canonical definition of verdictives and exercitive acts. Verdictives may be understood as speech acts that deliver an authoritative assessment or finding, like *I find you guilty*, whereas exercitives are acts through which a speaker exercises power, confers rights or imposes obligations, like *I order you to...*

Naming a group in a certain way is never neutral: it means giving it a symbolic hierarchical position, capabilities and practices. Language can therefore be constructive, when it does not record a pre-existing inequality but establishes it and stabilizes it over time, incorporating oppression into the categories in which the world is thought. A further link to consider is that between legitimacy and language. When some words or formulas become elements of the language of the ruling class, they fix what can be said without consequences and what is unthinkable. Power acts by preclusion of the possible room for maneuver.

In Gilead's dystopia these uses of language are explicit. Denominations such as "Handmaid", "Wife", "Aunt", not only refer to social roles but entirely define a person's being and doing from a hierarchical and legal point of view by assigning functions even before the discipline of the body.

Similarly, the loss of the proper name and its replacement with formulas of possession does not describe a subordination that has already occurred but carries it out on an exercitive level, making the person a linguistically available object. Oppression does not begin with physical violence but with speech: language does not accompany power, but is one of its most lethal and effective forms.

¹¹¹ Bianchi e Caponetto, 2025, pg 134 ebook version

From an illocutionary perspective, many statements do not have only the function of being true or false, but of establishing relationships, roles, or obligations, giving language a performative aspect. Its effectiveness depends on the social context, shared conventions, and the authority of the speaker, which make the act valid. This framework is relevant to understanding power dynamics because it shows how oppression can be exercised without resorting to physical force, but with speech acts that redefine identities and what can be done, said, or thought.

In Gilead, power operates systematically through performative speech acts. When authority says “it is the will of God” it is not only expressing a theological belief but is closing the field of action. A statement is an illocutionary act that transforms a decision into a norm.

Similarly, the noun “Handmaid” is not only descriptive, but is used in a linguistic act that assigns a function, constraining the body and behavior of the named person. Telling a woman that she is a handmaid means reducing her to her reproductive role even before actual physical coercion. Mandatory ritual formulas are also speech acts. To utter them is to manifest obedience, to omit them is to disobedience. Speaking correctly does not communicate content, but achieves political alignment.

Verdicts produce an *official* assessment and a recognized classification valid within the social system in which they are produced. They typically establish the moral or legal status of a subject, such as their being guilty or innocent. Their distinctive feature is that they do not describe something already present (or they do not always do so) but establish it through language. A verdicts not only expresses an opinion, but has real constitutive force. Once pronounced by an authority, the status of the subject being evaluated is changed

and their rights, responsibilities and actions are redefined. Privileged social classifiers can be defined, which can be oppressive when they have systematically unequal or asymmetric effects.

Exercitives are, on the other hand, speech acts through which authority such as ordering, prohibiting, granting is exercised. They do not evaluate what one is, but determine what one can or should do, influencing the decisions of others and limiting legitimate actions. They only function if the speaker is recognized as holding institutional authority and power. When this power is concentrated and uncontested, then exercitives become tools of systemic control. These mechanisms converge in Gilead, where classification and command operate in tandem.

By intertwining the two typologies of linguistic acts, complete acts of subordination can be produced, first by classifying individuals into hierarchies, and then by coercively regulating their behavior based on classification.

In the Gilead regime, power operates through this combination, transforming language into a tool of subordination. Institutional denominations are verdictive acts, they do not describe individual characteristics or choices but assign an ontological and social status. This type of classification is unfair because it irreversibly determines the entire future of people, through a decision made by others. The executive thus precedes the action: once classified the person naturally becomes what the language has decreed.

On this classification basis, the regime continuously issues other exercitive acts such as “you cannot read”, “you are only allowed to speak if...”: these are neither advice nor descriptions but acts that constrain the action, making some choices impossible and others obligatory. Impersonal and religious formulas reinforce the effectiveness of these acts, because they conceal the human agent. In

Gilead, therefore, subordination is not only material but also linguistically structured. The result is a system in which identity is decided by an authoritative linguistic act, action is limited by a pre-established order, and dissent is made semantically inappropriate before it is even politically dangerous.

In the relationship between authorities and institutions, a crucial aspect is the convergence between practical and epistemic authority. Those who hold the power to make others do things often also hold the power to determine what counts as knowledge. Overlap is not accidental, institutions are much more stable when practical obedience is accompanied by cognitive acceptance.

Epistemic authority manifests itself not only in saying what is true but in defining who is authorized to access this knowledge, in what terms and within what limits. Hierarchical institution types typically distribute knowledge asymmetrically, where the base of the pyramid knows the bare minimum and complex justification remains a privilege of the top; in this way, subordination appears as a natural consequence of differentiated competences and not as an unjust imposition. A key element is subordination by proxy. The institution does not need a direct exercise of power, it assigns intermediate roles that serve as a continuous transmission of authority, and those in these positions act as legitimate executors and not as autonomous sources. The strength of this mechanism lies in the fact that subordination is impersonal and obeys a function. Passive acceptance is based on this type of structure. The subordinate subject is not necessarily convinced of the correctness of the order but, rather, of the appropriateness of his or her role: as long as he or she agrees to stand in their place, the global order must not be explicitly justified. Hierarchy thus produces a cognitive closure effect where the critical

point of view is not only risky but conceptually inappropriate, because it exceeds the role's skills.

The interdependence of lack of credibility, misinterpretation, and invisibility becomes clear when one examines how these factors reinforce one another. Credibility deficits make it difficult for marginalised groups to articulate their experiences in ways that are taken seriously. Gendered violence provides another example. For decades, women's reports of harassment, assault, and domestic abuse were dismissed as exaggerations or misunderstandings. The absence of concepts like "sexual harassment," "gaslighting," or "coercive control" made it difficult for women to articulate their experiences¹¹². Media representations that trivialised or sensationalised gendered violence contributed to invisibility by reframing harm as entertainment or isolated drama, rather than as a structural injustice. In doing so, they normalised the violence, undermined the credibility of those who reported it, and eroded the interpretive resources needed to recognise it as violence at all. Propaganda that framed feminism as hysteria or moral decline undermined women's credibility. Subordination acts within legal and medical institutions reinforced these dynamics by treating women's testimony as unreliable¹¹³, for instance when symptoms of pain were attributed to anxiety rather than investigated clinically. Only through sustained feminist study and activism did new interpretive frameworks emerge, challenging the epistemic structures that had rendered women's experiences unintelligible.

These examples illustrate how epistemic injustice is not merely a matter of individual prejudice but a structural phenomenon. It is embedded in institutions, encoded in concepts, and reproduced through discourse. Propaganda and subordination acts exploit these structures, making domination appear natural or inevitable. To

¹¹² Fricker, 2007, pg 152

¹¹³ Langton, 1993, pg 315

challenge epistemic injustice, one must therefore address not only individual attitudes but the border epistemic environment¹¹⁴.

Resistance emerges through counter-interpretation, counter-visibility, and counter-credibility. Marginalised groups develop alternative frameworks that challenge dominant meanings. Black feminist thought, queer theory, disability justice, and decolonial epistemologies all offer new ways of understanding social reality. These frameworks do not simply add new concepts; they reconfigure the conceptual field. They make visible what was previously invisible, articulate what was previously inexpressible, and challenge the credibility hierarchies that sustain domination¹¹⁵.

The mechanisms of domination do not operate in isolation; they reinforce one another in ways that make domination resilient. Credibility deficits undermine interpretive agency; interpretive gaps produce invisibility. Propaganda exploits these dynamics by manipulating credibility, reshaping interpretation, and producing invisibility. Subordination acts stabilize these dynamics by embedding them in institutional practice. Together, they create an epistemic environment that sustains social hierarchy¹¹⁶.

Yet this interdependence also creates opportunities for resistance. Challenging one dimension of epistemic injustice can disrupt the others. Expanding visibility can challenge credibility deficits by making marginalised experiences harder to ignore. Developing new interpretive frameworks can challenge invisibility by making previously unintelligible experiences intelligible. Redistributing credibility can challenge interpretive domination by elevating marginalised voices. These interventions can create epistemic friction

¹¹⁴ Haslanger, 2012, pg 25

¹¹⁵ Medina, 2013, pg 108

¹¹⁶ Stanley, 2015, pg 77

that destabilises dominant frameworks and opens space for new forms of understanding¹¹⁷.

In conclusion, lack of credibility, misinterpretation, and social invisibility are not merely epistemic notions and phenomena but also political ones. They shape who can participate in public life, whose experiences count as knowledge, and whose perspectives shape collective understanding. Propaganda and subordination acts exploit these mechanisms to maintain domination. But these mechanisms are also sites of resistance. Through counter-credibility, counter-interpretation, and counter-visibility, marginalised groups challenge the epistemic structures that sustain inequality. The struggle for epistemic justice seems therefore to be inseparable from the struggle for social justice. It requires transforming not only institutions and laws but also the epistemic environment that shapes how people see, hear, and understand one another. Only by addressing these epistemic dimensions together can societies move toward genuine equality¹¹⁸.

Taken together, these mechanisms reveal a continuum: from the erosion of credibility, to the distortion of interpretation, to the production of invisibility. What emerges is a comprehensive picture of how power can dismantle epistemic agency. The conclusion draws these threads together and returns to the central question of what it means to preserve the capacity to know and to be known.

1.6 Conclusions

The analyses developed across the preceding sections converge toward a single insight: epistemic injustice is not an accidental

¹¹⁷ Medina, 2013, pg 112

¹¹⁸ Collins, 2000, pg 251

distortion of communicative life but a structural feature of social orders organised through power, hierarchy, and the differential distribution of interpretive resources. What began as an exploration of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice has unfolded into a broader account of institutions, conceptual frameworks, and discursive environments shape - and often constrain - the possibilities of knowing, speaking and being heard. The conclusion that emerges is not merely that epistemic injustice is pervasive, but that it is constitutive: it forms part of the very architecture through which subjects are recognised, social meanings are stabilised, and political realities are produced.

Across this chapter, we have seen how testimonial injustice operates as a micro-level mechanism of credibility deficit, yet its effects cannot be understood without situating it within the macro-structures of power that determine whose voices are intelligible in the first place. Fricker's account provides the vocabulary for identifying credibility harms, but the deeper theoretical work has shown that testimonial injustice is rarely an isolated event. It is embedded in socially patterned habits of attention, affect and interpretation that make some testimonies appear natural or authoritative while others are dismissed as unreliable. Medina calls for the development of *kaleidoscopic sensibilities* precisely to counter these patterns, cultivating multiperspectival forms of perception capable of resisting epistemic injustice. These sensibilities are not neutral; they are cultivated through institutions, media ecosystems, and historical sedimentations of prejudice. Thus, testimonial injustice is best understood not as a deviation from epistemic norms but as an expression of the norms themselves when they are shaped by unjust social arrangements. Hermeneutical injustice, in turn, reveals the deeper layer of conceptual and interpretive exclusion. The inability of marginalized groups to

render their experiences intelligible within dominant interpretive frameworks is not simply a gap in collective understanding; it is a form of structural silencing. As Haslanger and Mills have shown, conceptual schemes are not passive mirrors of reality but tools that organise social life, often in ways that obscure the operations of power. When certain experiences — for example, sexual harassment before the term existed — lack the conceptual resources necessary for their articulation in words, the harm is not merely epistemic but ontological: the subject cannot fully exist as a knower of her own experience. This is the core of hermeneutical marginalisation: the world becomes less intelligible for some, and their unintelligibility becomes a mechanism of further subordination.

The integration of propaganda and conceptual silencing into this framework has allowed us to see how epistemic injustice is actively produced and maintained. Stanley's account of propaganda as the manipulation of epistemic environments demonstrates that the distortion of public reason is not incidental but strategic. Propaganda works by exploiting existing prejudices, amplifying credibility deficits, and reinforcing hermeneutical gaps. It creates conditions in which certain groups are systematically disbelieved, while others are granted automatic epistemic authority. Langton's notion of illocutionary disablement further clarifies how speech can fail not because of the speaker's inadequacy but because the social conditions necessary for uptake are absent. When a woman says "No" and it is not heard as refusal, the failure is not linguistic but political: the social norms governing sexual scripts override her illocutionary force. This is conceptual silencing in its purest form — the foreclosure of communicative agency through the structure of social meanings. These dynamics become even more entrenched when they are embedded in institutional structures.

Institutional subordination, drawing on Foucault and contemporary critical race theorists, provides the final layer of analysis. Institutions do not merely reflect epistemic hierarchies, they can produce and enforce them. Through bureaucratic procedures, classificatory systems, legal categories, and educational curricula, institutions shape who counts as a credible knower and what counts as legitimate knowledge. Foucault's insight that power and knowledge are co-constructive becomes particularly salient here: institutions generate the epistemic conditions under which subjects are formed, disciplined and evaluated. Mills' concept of the "epistemology of ignorance" shows how institutions can cultivate not only knowledge but strategic forms of not-knowing - ignorance that is functional for maintaining racial, gendered, and economic hierarchies. Thus, epistemic injustice is not merely a failure of individual virtue but a systemic effect of institutionalised power.

Taken together, these analyses reveal a complex ecology of epistemic oppression. Testimonial injustice undermines the credibility of marginalised speakers; hermeneutical injustice deprives them of the conceptual tools needed to interpret their experiences; propaganda manipulates the epistemic environment to entrench these injustices; conceptual silencing disables their communicative agency; and institutional subordination stabilises these dynamics through formal structures of authority. The upshot is not simply that these phenomena are interconnected, but that they form a mutually reinforcing system. Each mechanism amplifies the others, creating a feedback loop in which epistemic exclusion becomes self-perpetuating.

In closing, the preceding analyses demonstrate that epistemic injustice is both a symptom and a mechanism of broader social injustice. It reveals how power operates through knowledge, how

subjects are shaped through knowledge, how subjects are shaped through discursive practices, and how the struggles for justice must include the struggle for epistemic agency. The task ahead is not simply to repair epistemic harms but to reconfigure the epistemic conditions under which social life becomes possible. This requires not only theoretical clarity but political imagination - the capacity to envision and build epistemic worlds in which all subjects can speak, be heard and understand themselves as full participants in the collective project of knowing. To confront epistemic injustice is therefore to confront the very conditions under which knowledge becomes possible.

Chapter 2 - The Machinery of Meaning

2.1 Introduction

Questioning the relationship between power and knowledge constitutes no mere theoretical exercise, nor a sociological catalogue of cognitive inequalities, but an entry into contemporary critical philosophy's core. This inquiry concerns reality's very thinkability conditions: the forms through which the world manifests, the conceptual structures rendering certain experiences intelligible while consigning others to unrecognisability. Every society produces a *régime de vérité* - a constellation of practices, categories and criteria that not only regulate what may be said, but shape what can be perceived, imagined or remembered¹¹⁹. Power emerges neither from external force acting upon knowledge nor from a repressive censor, but from the organising principle of the field of intelligibility, a productive architect rather than a juridical sovereign. While this analysis follows a broadly Foucaultian conception of power as productive and relational, a totalitarian regime like Gilead also deploys more traditional sovereign forms of coercion. These two modalities do not contradict each other; rather, they coexist as a complementary mechanism through which the regime secures epistemic and social domination.

20th and 21st century philosophy demonstrates that power produces subjectivities, rationalities, visibilities before thought emerges, constituting the very possibility conditions of thought. Categories prove no neutral classificatory tools but, rather, the sediments of historical struggles, exclusions, appropriations determining authoritative speakers, herable voices, understandable

¹¹⁹ Foucault, 1980, pg 131.

experiences. Power analysis is therefore equivalent to thought's architecture analysis, invisible scaffolding structuring basic interpretive acts, salience distributions, and recognition capacities.

Within this horizon, epistemic injustice appears not as an anomaly but as a structural effect of social orders that distribute cognitive resources asymmetrically. Testimonial devaluation, hermeneutical marginalisation, and the social production of ignorance are not accidental distortions but mechanisms through which power stabilises its own visibility and obscurity. Unknown phenomena rarely constitute voids and deliberate institutional practices, institutions result, deciding visibility and shadowing necessities. Ignorance does not simply function as the opposite of knowledge, but involves manipulation of conditions of production such as strategic attention, credibility, and the distribution of interpretive possibilities that sustain hierarchies.

Gilead exemplifies all this: Handmaid's Ceremony-rape experiences lack articulable language (*violence* category absent, *holy union* imposed), pre-regime identities are archivally annihilated (2.3), reproductive wisdom is categorically extracted as Commander-property (2.4), knowability thresholds are arbitrated by Commander's scriptural monopoly (2.5). Chapter 1's diagnosis, "violence without noise", reveals an engineered epistemology; silence is not a communicative failure but a machinery's output.

These dynamics become particularly evident when we consider the role of institutions. Institutions do not merely retain or transmit what is considered to be knowledge; they produce it, filter it, and legitimise it. Schools, courts, universities, newspapers, and governments function as epistemic laboratories in which it is decided what counts as fact, what deserves to be remembered, and what can be dismissed as irrelevant. They establish criteria of relevance, define

standards of evidence, and construct official narratives. At the same time, they operate as mechanisms of exclusion: they can generate systemic ignorance, erase memories, and neutralise forms of knowledge that do not conform to their normative patterns. Institutional ignorance is not a failure but a function — a way of maintaining existing hierarchies and protecting epistemic privilege.

Categorisation lies at these processes' heart. Categories constitute no mere descriptive labels but, so to speak, forms of conceptual life, each carrying embedded worldviews, normative expectations, implicit hierarchies. Categories do not simply sort reality; they *rank* it. They highlight some differences as salient while erasing others, producing normal/deviant and human/less-than-human distinctions that mirror existing power relations. Categories function equally as cognitive extraction tools, absorbing subordinated group's experiences and practices, reinterpreting them through dominant codes, incorporating results into epistemic orders, while denying their originators either recognition or autonomy over meanings produced. Cognitive extraction thus constitutes a sophisticated appropriation, a use of marginalized knowledge without those in control granting sovereignty of meaning or application.

The question *who decides what is knowable* should not be read as implying a sovereign subject who voluntarily determines epistemic boundaries; rather, it names the effect of distributed epistemic positioning produced by institutions, practices and classificatory regimes. To determine knowability's boundaries is equivalent to determining contestability, claimability, transformability, what experiences acquire a name, which injustice can be articulated, and which subjectivities emerge as intelligible. The struggle for knowability makes the struggle for social existence itself apparent, what cannot be said remains unrecognized, untransformable. Epistemic structure

therefore does not constitute a mere interpretative framework but, rather, justice possibility conditions or their systematic denial.

The following sections examine four dimensions of this machinery of meaning. First, power as the architect of thought, analysing how power shapes the conceptual conditions of intelligibility. Second, the role of institutions in producing and legitimising ignorance, showing how epistemic hierarchies are stabilised through bureaucratic and discursive practices. Third, the normativity of categories and the dynamics of cognitive extraction, through which dominant groups appropriate, reinterpret, and neutralise the knowledge of subordinated communities. Finally, the political question of who decides what is knowable, and how the boundaries of intelligibility determine which experiences can be named, contested, or transformed.

The aim is not only the theoretical one of describing how power shapes thought, but also the practical or political one of showing how these mechanisms can be rendered visible, criticised, and reconfigured. If power is the architect of thought, then critical theory¹²⁰ must become an alternative architecture: a practice of dismantling and rebuilding the epistemic structures that define what we can know and what we can be. Philosophy, in this sense, is not only contemplative, but also political — it is an effort to reopen the space of the possible, to free thought from its captures, and to restore to subjects the capacity to name and understand the world, and thus transform it.

¹²⁰ The idea that critical theory must intervene in the very conditions that make thought and knowledge possible originates in the Frankfurt School. In *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937), Max Horkheimer defines critical theory as a practice aimed at exposing and transforming the social structures that shape cognition and subjectivity. This insight is later expanded by Adorno's negative dialectics and, in a different register, by Foucault's genealogies, which show how power produces the regimes of truth within which the thinkable takes form.

2.2 Power as *The Architect of Thought*

As Searle notes, “the notion of power is the notion of a capacity, and for that reason, a power may exist without ever being used or exercised”¹²¹. Yet, this conception remains within a traditional framework in which power is a capacity possessed by an agent. It is precisely against this model that the Foucauldian shift gains its critical force. This already destabilises the classical view of power as mere repression. If power can exist without being used, then its essence cannot lie in prohibition alone. The traditional view of power as external prohibition is one conceptually impoverished. This exposes the limits of the juridical model of power - power as the right to forbid and punish. Rooted in early modern political theory, this paradigm presupposes a sovereign subject who possesses power and applies it externally to limit the actions of others. Power appears here as a substance, a property, a prerogative: something one has and uses. Yet this legal model captures only power’s most visible, and so most superficial operations - those moments of overt prohibition that Chapter 1.3 identified as “violence without noise”. It remains blind to power’s deeper, more pervasive mechanisms: the productive capacities that constitute subjects and the field of thought before any explicit interdiction becomes thinkable or necessary.

To understand these deeper mechanisms, we must shift from a negative to a productive conception of power. Power is not primarily an apparatus that prohibits, censors or punishes, but a force that produces subjects, objects and truth. Foucault’s work marks a decisive

¹²¹ Searle John, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pg 145. Searle’s conception of power as a capacity that can exist without being exercised stands in sharp contrast to Foucault’s view. For Foucault, power has no latent form: it exists only in its exercise, in the concrete relations and practices through which it circulates and produces effects.

break with this paradigm. He captures this shift with precision: “we must cease one and for all to describe the effect of power in negative terms”¹²². Power does not merely say “no”; it creates the very space within which no and yes become thinkable. To describe power as productive means recognising that it generates the categories, distinctions, and norms through which reality becomes intelligible. It does not simply constrain the subjects; it constitutes them.

Foucault’s genealogical method reveals that power is not a possession, not an attribute of a sovereign, but a network of relations that traverses the social body and operates through practices, discourses, institutions and devices¹²³. Power is not something one holds; it is something that circulates, something that acts through us and upon us. As he writes, “power produces reality; it produces domains of object and rituals of truth”¹²⁴. This is not a metaphor. To understand power as productive is to recognise that it operates at the level of the conditions of possibility of thought. It configures the conceptual space within which subjects move, defines obligatory paths, delimits shadow zones, establishes what can be seen and what must remain invisible. To analyse power, therefore, is to analyse the architecture of intelligibility itself.

This architecture becomes fully visible when examined through concrete regimes of truth. For Foucault, visibility and discursivity are structured by power relations that define what counts as fact and evidence, what can be named, and what must remain unspoken.

No contemporary case study illustrates this architectural potency more starkly than Gilead society. Gilead does not merely repress women’s autonomy through spectacular violence, it forges an

¹²² Foucault, 1975, pg 194

¹²³ Foucault, 2013, pg 92. Genealogy, for Foucault, is a historical method that uncovers how power produces regimes of truth by tracing the contingent practices and institutions that make certain forms of knowledge and subjectivity possible.

¹²⁴ Foucault, 1975, pg 194

entire epistemic field wherein female subjectivities emerge as intelligible solely through ritualised biblical extraction. Offred's fragmented memories become confined to the *sayable* under the Commanders' supervisory gaze. Her pre-Gilead experiences becomes not merely censored but even grammatically impossible, unthinkable within Gilead's conceptual architecture¹²⁵. The regime engineers a *régime de vérité*¹²⁶ constituted by scriptural practices, authorised Aunts as exegetes, and validation rituals that produce orthodox knowledge while systematically engineering ignorance of all alternatives. Every historical conjuncture bears such *régime de vérité*: "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true... It is the set of practices that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is authorised to speak it, and what procedures validate or invalidate statements"¹²⁷. Foucault's notion of *régime de vérité* does not imply that truth itself is relative, but that every historical period organises what is *taken to be true* through specific practices, institutions, and criteria of validation. Genealogy examines these shifting conditions of veridiction without denying the distinction between truth and falsehood; it analyses how societies produce and regulate the boundaries of the *recognised* truth. What is called "truth" emerges not as correspondence but as an effect of historically specific veridictional practices. In Gilead, Commanders monopolise scriptural hermeneutics as the sole legitimate knowledge-practice, pre-regime histories of women's rights, secular science, contraceptive technologies become not merely false but unthinkable. Women's autonomous testimonies can circulate only as coerced confessional speech under torture or

¹²⁵ Atwood, 1996, chapter 13

¹²⁶ Foucault, 1980, pg 131

¹²⁷ Ibidem

ritual, any grammar or self-authorship falls outside the regime's conceptual coordinates.

This production of truth relies on classificatory frameworks that organise the very horizon of intelligibility. This architectural logic permeates the sphere of categorisation, which functions as the literal scaffolding of intelligibility. Categories constitute not neutral classificatory devices that organise inert information, but normative horizons that organise perception itself. They determine what will register as object, event, subject, or non-entity, what will emerge as meaningful, relevant, or conceivable. Linda Martin Alcoff describes similar mechanism in the real world in *Visible Identities*, where she argues that social categories like gender, race, class, disability “do not merely describe social positions, they prescribe expectations, roles, and possibilities”¹²⁸. They stabilise dominant identities as normative horizons while rendering marginalised experiences epistemically opaque, experiences that exceed or contradict the categorical frame.

Charlotte Witt further develops this insight by arguing that “social roles function in system of internally related roles, and not as independent actions or activities that are woven together only externally”¹²⁹. Categories acquire their meaning relationally through dense networks of social expectations, norms, and practices. In Gilead, the category *Handmaid* exemplifies this total operation: it extracts women's reproductive-biological knowledge and reinterprets it through patriarchal-theological codes without granting originators hermeneutical control or epistemic autonomy. Within Gilead's classificatory framework, Offred's body is readable only as a container for the Commander's seed; whatever remains of her subjectivity appears merely as a risk factor—an unpredictable, potentially

¹²⁸ Alcoff Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, gender, and the Self*, Oxford University Press, 2006, 50

¹²⁹ Witt Charlotte, *Social Goodness: The Ontology of Social Norms*, Oxford University Press, 2023, pg 120

disobedient element that the regime must monitor and contain. The category *Handmaid* naturalises Wives as the normative horizon of femininity, Handmaids as deviant fertility-instruments, and Unwomen as epistemic voids actively erased from the regime's field of sayability.

These categories operate because they shape attention, that is to say, the pre-reflective filter of what can appear. Power's architecture extends to the management of attention, functioning as the pre-reflective gateway through which phenomena enter ineligibility. Attention constitutes no neutral, individual cognitive faculty but a capacity socially sculpted, culturally drilled, politically vectored according to regime's priorities: what strikes us as salient, what fades into shadowy background, what pulses with relevance or urgency. Charles Mills elucidates this mechanism through the concept of *White Ignorance*¹³⁰ in his works, where racial power engineers not mere epistemic lack, but an active non-knowing, a cognitive stratagem that safeguards dominance by rendering structural injustices unintelligible or insignificant. Ignorance constructs rather than creating voids: dominant groups cultivate not-seeing, not-hearing, not-recognising as functional blindness protecting the normative order.

Gilead operationalises this attentional engineering with totalitarian precision. The Eyes and Aunts embody trained supervisions: systemic rapes are perceived not as violence but as holy "Ceremony," whispers of dissent as satanic delusion, Moira's escape as an Unwomanly impossibility rather than catalytic act. Pre-reflective attentional dispositions sediment through relentless ritual repetition: Handmaids learn not to see each other's contained anguish during Salvagings, to normalise Particicution as divine hygiene rather than collective murder, to divert salience from systemic extraction toward regime-loyalty tests. Hierarchies embed themselves in the perceptual

¹³⁰ Mills Charles, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, 1997, pg 18

texture as natural, plausible, inevitable, operating beneath conscious deliberation through affective tilts (disgust toward Unwomen), embodied habits (avoiding eye-contact during Ceremonies), and inherited cultural orientations structuring the tacit horizon of experience.

These attentional and categorical mechanisms culminate in the production of subjects who internalise the regime's epistemic order. Power's profundity reaches its deepest operation through what Foucault calls "subjectivation" ("assujettissement"), not external imposition upon pre-social individualities, but constitutive labour producing the kinds of subject who can appear intelligible, livable, accountable within a given regime. Power does not intervene on thought from the outside; it constitutes the very condition under which thought becomes possible. Judith Butler contends in *Bodies That Matter* that social norms "produce the kinds of being who can behave, who can be recognised as agents, who can be held responsible"¹³¹, no anterior, pre-normative practices delimiting livable from unlivable lives, intelligible from unintelligible identities. José Medina but the conceptual focus on this internalisation in *The Epistemology of Resistance* through epistemic vigilance, where subjects assimilate regime hierarchies via socialisation processes, learning to trust authorised voices, like Commanders' scriptural readings, and distrust marginalised ones, like Handmaids' whispers, as disposition that feel natural¹³².

In Gilead, Handmaids fully undergo this subjectivation process. Offred experiences her autonomous thoughts as *unwomanly*, her memories of the past as an illicit mental trespass rather than legitimate recall. Power literally *thinks in people*, not through

¹³¹ Butler Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, 1993, pg 3

¹³² Medina José, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Routledge, 2013, ch 5

implanted content but through sculpted perceptual grammars, salience cues, and a plausibility horizon shaped by histories of domination. Privilege and marginality crystallise as epistemic stances: what *people* (Wives, Commanders) notice, ignore, take for granted, question, all is structured by the regime's attentional architecture.

These mechanisms forges tightly interwoven epistemic cycles exhibiting remarkable resilience. Credibility deficits produce hermeneutical gaps¹³³ that yield invisibility and reinforces credibility deficits in self-sustaining loops. Gilead exemplifies this circle perfectly: Handmaids' testimonies dismissed preemptively as hysterical female delusion have the effect that their experiences lack available categories for articulation. This has the consequence that those experiences vanish from collective recognition, which in turn implies that their supposed unreliability appears to confirm the original credibility deficit. This engineered ignorance determines in advance what can count as evidence and what cannot, scriptural exegesis takes over experiential testimony, divine fertility-gift is interpreted as biological fact, and female sterility as moral sin rather than Commanders' biological failure. Power requires no continuous intervention, it needs only sustain these mechanisms generating epistemic inertia.

In Gilead, these cycles stabilise above all through institutions, which systematically produce and legitimise ignorance as positive function rather than failure, as Section 2.3 will show, through Command Centers, Aunts' training facilities, and salvaging rituals. Power, as architect, constructs inescapable conceptual edifices of thought, naturalising dominance through the deepest grammatical structures of intelligibility, from the silencing phenomena analyzed in

¹³³ Fricker, 2007, pg 148

Cap. 1 to the structural mechanism of meaning that we have been examining in this chapter .

2.3 Institution and production of ignorance

Extending 2.2's analysis of power as thought's architect, institutions stabilise epistemic hierarchies through systemic ignorance production, not accidental voids but structured artefacts of selection, classification, archiving and normalization, deciding what merits recording vs shadowing. Institutional ignorance shifts attention from individual cognition to organised social processes determining knowability, forgettability, and non-appearance. In Gilead, these institutional mechanisms of ignorance operate alongside overt exercises of sovereign power, like censorship, spectacular punishment and archival destruction. Totalitarianism intensifies both the subtle and the coercive dimensions of power rather than replacing one with the other.

As Charles W. Mills formulates in *White Ignorance*, “racial ignorance¹³⁴ constitutes an inverted epistemology socially organised to sustain domination, a cognitive and moral economy actively produced to protect privilege¹³⁵”.

Nancy Tuana deepens this insight by saying that “we need the ability to translate practices of ignorance among very different

¹³⁴ For Mills, racial ignorance is a *socially organised way of not knowing* that sustains racial hierarchy. It is not a cognitive failure but a political achievement.

¹³⁵ Mills, Charles W, *White Ignorance in The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, 1997, pg 18

communities”¹³⁶. Tuana means that those working to understand and challenge epistemic injustice must be able to compare and interpret how different communities *produce, maintain, and experience* ignorance. “Practices of ignorance” are the concrete social and institutional mechanisms through which ignorance is actively generated, not simply a cognitive gap. She distinguishes six types of ignorance we can encounter in the path of searching knowledge. The first involves knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know¹³⁷, exemplified by male-dominated science that ignored contraceptive pill side-effects until the 1990s, prioritizing the problem of libido loss.

Second comes known-unknowns obscured by beliefs/theories, like clitoris dismissed as “secondary, useless in reproductive focused anatomy texts”¹³⁸.

The third type - which Tuana labels “they don't want us to know” – refers to the ignorance of certain groups systematically cultivated by the groups in power¹³⁹ for the purpose of hiding knowledge for security, economic or political reasons, while the bearers of that knowledge are called subversive” or, paradoxically, “ignorant”. To link one of her examples to the world of Gilead, we refer to when before Gilead Janine (OfWarren) discovers her pregnancy. “She searches online for an abortion consultation centre. When she finally finds one, the conversation immediately turns coercive. Before she can even explain her situation, she is told that she would make an excellent mother — despite having just disclosed that she struggles with substance use, has almost no financial stability, and is already caring for a child. The counsellor then tries to frighten her: she is told that, to perform the abortion, ‘they will have to cut the baby inside you into

¹³⁶ Tuana Nancy, *The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Hypatia, 2006, pg 3

¹³⁷ Ivi, pg 4

¹³⁸ Ivi, 8

¹³⁹ Ivi, pg 9

pieces and then suck it out,' even though the pregnancy is only three weeks along. The call ends with an additional threat — that if even a tiny piece were left inside her, she would become sterile. After returning home and seeking a second opinion, she finally meets a gynaecologist. He immediately dismisses the frightening claims she heard, explaining that he is legally required to inform her about alleged risks such as increased chances of breast or uterine cancer — but he also tells her plainly that these claims are medically unfounded, 'a lot of nonsense'¹⁴⁰. This episode illustrates imposed or manufactured ignorance: institutions are legally required to circulate misleading or scientifically unsupported information, producing ignorance through official channels. The doctor's admission shows how ignorance is not accidental but *structurally mandated* and embedded in the very procedures meant to provide care.

A fourth view of ignorance is particularly prevalent, namely that "they don't know and don't want to know"¹⁴¹ links to privilege and oppression via negligence. Tuana's example concerns the long history of scientific racism in Europe and the United States, where institutions systematically produced ignorance about Black people — for instance through biased medical research, exclusion from clinical studies, and pseudoscientific theories. This form of ignorance was not accidental but structurally tied to racial oppression, long before the civil-rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. But we can give an example relative to the Gileadian society concerning the wives' conversations about Jezebel. The wives are aware of the existence of brothels where the Jezebels are forced to work, but they are completely unaware that their husbands go there and take advantage of them, freely choosing not to concern themselves with their husbands' frequenting these places or the exploitation that ensues. The wives simply erase these

¹⁴⁰ *The Handmaid's Tale*, HULU series, episode 4x04 "Milk"

¹⁴¹ Tuana, 2006, pg 10

questions from their minds, rendering the relevant facts non-existent in their daily narrative.

The fifth type of ignorance depends on not granting cognitive authority to someone, placing their identity at an epistemic disadvantage. This form of ignorance arises when certain groups are denied cognitive authority: their testimony is not believed, so their knowledge never enters the shared epistemic space. The result is that others remain ignorant not because information is absent, but because they refuse to recognise the people who possess it. Cognitive authority "is determined by many factors, including the character of the speaker, their intellectual capacity and their reasonableness"¹⁴², which is why dominant groups seek to eradicate it from subjugated groups, so that they can be transformed into epistemically unreliable members, effectively rendering them incapable of testimony.

The last type of ignorance is defined as loving ignorance, which is the acceptance of what we cannot know¹⁴³. It is the opposite of wilful ignorance: it rests on an openness to evidence and experience, rather than a negligent refusal to acknowledge them. Knowledge can never be possessed in its entirety by any individual. Acknowledging this fact, recognising the finitude of our epistemic perspective, is not a deficit but a form of cognitive maturity. This type of ignorance is not the one exploited by dominant groups; it is a reflective awareness of our limits that enables openness, curiosity, and responsible inquiry. Unlike the previous forms, which sustain oppression, this is a non-oppressive form of ignorance: a self-aware recognition of our epistemic limits that fosters intellectual humility rather than domination.

Dotson complements this geography of ignorance by showing its structural effect: epistemic oppression "persistent epistemic

¹⁴² Tuana, 2006, pg 13

¹⁴³ Ivi, pg 15

exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production"¹⁴⁴. When institutions control archives, curricula, research agendas, or media, they determine whose experiences become legible and whose are erased. In this sense, the various forms of ignorance described above function as instruments for producing persistent epistemic exclusion.

These frameworks illuminate the dynamics at work in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in the analysis developed in *A womb of One's Own*. In the essay n.2 *Dystopia from a Woman's Point of View* the author, Rachel Robinson-Greene exposes three main strategies that Gilead has employed "to dumb down its citizenry"¹⁴⁵:

- Prohibits the population, especially female ones, from reading.
- Carefully reviews existing literature, ensuring that they are suitable for the objective of the Sons of Jacob, reworking, modifying or eliminating them.
- Seriously restrict and control conditions regarding communication within the community, who can speak, what they can speak about and when.

A fascist-theocratic system like this one, is based almost entirely on the interpretation of sacred texts, in this case the Bible. This is why Gilead does not ban all books, but gives the Bible the authority to decide whether they are legitimate or not. The Bible is actually an excellent choice because, in America, where the events of the novel happen, almost everyone is aware of the Bible's existence and, broadly speaking, its content. The Bible is long, written in an archaic language and "frankly, many of the citizens of Gilead have not read it, at least not

¹⁴⁴ Dotson Kristie, *Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression*, Social Epistemology, 2014, pg 1

¹⁴⁵ Robinson-Greene Rachel, *The Handmaid's Tale and Philosophy. A Wombs of One's Own*, Open Court Chicago, Popular Culture and Philosophy Collection, 2019, pg 27

in its entirety”¹⁴⁶, which is why it becomes malleable and excellent for changing the narrative one wishes to present.

Conceptualizing ignorance institutionally reveals its political dimension: unevenly distributed along power lines, protecting dominants while hyperexposing subordinates, ignorance governs through archival management of pasts, not through neutral containers but through the power that decides between remembrance and erasure. Michelle Caswell characterized “symbolic annihilation in archives as the under-representation, mis-representation, and/or absence of minoritized communities in the historic record, together with attendant feelings of exclusion and erasure”¹⁴⁷. Marisa Fuentes, in the new edition of *Dispossessed Lives*, explores this connection further by showing how colonial archives produce structural silence. The lives of enslaved women appear only as fragments, distortions, or administrative records. Fuentes defines these silences as *archival violence*, that “can occur in multiple forms but lead always in disappearance”¹⁴⁸. Saidiya Hartman in her work takes this argument further, showing that archival absence is not an innocent void but the result of an explicit history of surveillance, control and creation of ignorance. Hartman talks about *critical fabulation* as a method for filling the gaps, but her fundamental insight is that absence itself is an effect of power¹⁴⁹. In this sense, Hartman completes the picture sketched before: if Cashwell shows who is erased, and Fuentes how, Hartman shows why - because erasure is functional to the reproduction of social order.

¹⁴⁶ Robinson-Greene, 2019, pg 27

¹⁴⁷ Caswell Michelle, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, Routledge Studies in Archives, 2021, pg 83

¹⁴⁸ Fuentes Marisa, *Dispossessed Lives*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, pg 143

¹⁴⁹ Hartman Saidiya, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, pg 164

These perspectives, considered together, allow us to understand more precisely the logic of temporal erasure in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead does not just censor: it reorganises the past. The regime constructs an official narrative in which it presents itself as the only possible response to the previous chaos. The destruction of documents, the rewriting of history and the manipulation of archives are central techniques of its power. For example, in the novel it is possible to read this passage:

Not every Commander has a Handmaid: some of their wives have children. *From each, says the slogan according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* We recited that three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts¹⁵⁰,

Here everything might seem fine, except that, as Robinson-Greene points out (and it should be obvious to the more attentive readers), this is not a passage taken from the Acts of the Bible, but from Marx's elaboration of capitalist necessity. The problem I want to highlight, however, is not so much the bastardisation of Marx's text, or the fact that the problem is not Offred's misrecognition of the text, but the fear-saturated environment that makes verification impossible: in Gilead, one cannot question sources, consult archives, or even trust one's own memory without risking punishment

The episode of Japanese tourists visiting Gilead is an emblematic example of this dynamic. In Gilead, visitors encounter a curated and spectacularized version of the regime: a living museum that shows only what Gilead wants to make visible. The Handmaids must declare themselves happy, willing, and grateful. The atrocities are

¹⁵⁰ Atwood, 1996, pg 117

hidden. This is not simply propaganda: it is a form of selective archiving. The regime produces a version of itself for external observers, while preventing its own citizens from accessing any alternative narrative. The ignorance is twofold: the inhabitants of Gilead are ignorant of the outside world, and visitors are ignorant of the internal violence. Both forms of ignorance are produced through the management of memory and visibility.

Temporal erasure also operates at the individual level. Handmaids are stripped of their names, their histories, their previous identities. Their past lives are not only forbidden, they are made inaccessible. Without documents, without recognition, without a place in collective memory, their past becomes unthinkable. It is a form of epistemic violence: the removal of the resources necessary to understand themselves as temporally continuous subjects. As Dotson notes, epistemic oppression often involves the obstruction of a group's ability to understand and articulate their own experience. Gilead achieves this obstruction also through the annihilation of personal archives.

Finally, Achille Mbembe, in his work, reminds us that power control not only life and death but also memory: it decides which lives deserve to be remembered and which can be erased: "it calls for the burning of memory in the belief that might emerge from the ashes can never be worse than what we already endure"¹⁵¹. In this sense, temporal erasure is a form of epistemic ignorance: a way to produce absence, silence and oblivion as instruments of government.

Temporal erasure is therefore not simply memory erasure: it is an active operation of restructuring time. Institutions decide which stories deserve to be preserved and which must be eliminated. They shape the temporal horizon within which subjects can situate themselves. By

¹⁵¹ Mbembe Achille, *Necropolitics*, Duke University Press, 2019, pg 170

controlling the archives, they control identity, legitimacy, and the very possibility of imagining a different future. Ignorance becomes a temporal technology: a way of organising the past to secure the present.

In line with what has emerged in the previous sections, ignorance is not a void but a product: an effect of practices that select not only what becomes knowledge, but what can become the object of attention, indignation or memory. Mills speaks of a *systematic misperception* that does not stem from individual error but from a social order that requires not seeing what would undermine it¹⁵². This ignorance is not passive: it's a form of protection. It protects the emotional and political stability of dominant groups by preventing the suffering of others from becoming a demand for justice.

Kristie Dotson clarifies that this protection is asymmetrical. Ignorance does not affect everyone equally: it affects most those who depend on epistemic resources that the social order does not provide. Institutional ignorance does not protect people; it protects the regime from the truth, and it prevents citizens from having any possibility of telling it.

Josè Medina offers the tools to understand how this protection also operates on an affective and pedagogical level. Medina speaks of *affective insensitivity* as a disposition that is formed through social and institutional practices¹⁵³. The problem is not only that certain facts remain unknown; it is that they are prevented from even reaching us — they never enter our perceptual or emotional horizon, so they cannot affect us. Institutions shape what appears bearable, what can be recognised as injustice, what can be perceived as pain. Ignorance thus becomes a form of anaesthesia: it protects the social order by preventing suffering from becoming a transformative force. This

¹⁵² Mills, 2007, pg 20

¹⁵³ Medina, 2013, pg 98

affective infrastructure is directly intertwined with educational institutions. If archives decide which lives deserve to be remembered, schools decide which lives deserve to be taught. Medina speaks of “epistemic resources” to refer to concepts, categories and languages that allow us to name and interpret experiences¹⁵⁴. Educational institutions operate through a similar mechanism. The curriculum is not a simple selection of content, it is a construction of collective memory. What is taught becomes part of shared history, what is not taught disappears, like the most direct implication from the famous saying “history is always written by the winners”. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books, books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. Educational ignorance is thus a form of protection of the dominant identity, what is not taught cannot be contested.

Dotson clarifies that this curricular exclusion is a form of “epistemic exclusion”, the inability to access the resources necessary to understand one’s position in the world¹⁵⁵. Educational ignorance is therefore the continuation of affective protection by other means: it prevents history from becoming a space of conflict, pain and responsibility.

Mbembe reminds us that power decides not only who can live or must die, but also who can be remembered or ignored¹⁵⁶. Education is one of the places where this decision takes root. A curriculum that erases certain histories, that renders certain lives invisible is not simply incomplete, it is a device of ignorance. It protects the social order by preventing students from developing the categories to question it.

Ignorance as a protection of the social order and curricular ignorance are therefore two sides of the same coin. Institutions

¹⁵⁴ Ivi, pg 39

¹⁵⁵ Dotson, 2014, pg 116

¹⁵⁶ Mbembe, 2020, pg 66

produce not only what we know, but what we can *bear to* know and what we *learn not to* see. Ignorance is a political technology in its own right and can stabilize the social order by preventing pain from becoming a transformative force - and education is one of its most effective tools.

Institutional ignorance is not limited to protecting the social order through the management of emotions and education: it also extends to the fields of science and media, which operate as devices of epistemic selection. In line with what has emerged in the previous section, ignorance is not an accident but also a full project, a set of practices that establish which phenomena deserve to be investigated, which can be ignored and which must be made invisible.

Indeed, science, far from being a neutral domain, participates in the production of ignorance through what it decides not to investigate. The selection of research topics, funding, methodologies and interpretative categories is never neutral: it reflects and reproduces social hierarchies. Scientific ignorance is not a void of knowledge, but the result of what science decides not to see. When science does not consider the living conditions of marginalized groups worthy of study, it produces not only factual ignorance but also the impossibility of giving these conditions an objective status. Science thus becomes a device for protecting the social order, not because it hides information but because it does not create the circumstances for producing it.

This dynamic extends to the media, which operate as a device of visibility. If science decides what can be studied, the media decides what can be seen. The selection of news, the construction of narratives, and information saturation determine what appears urgent, what appears marginal, what appears irrelevant¹⁵⁷. Media ignorance is

¹⁵⁷ Stanley, 2015, pg 55

not only or not always an absence of information: it is also and often an excess of irrelevant information that obscures what matters. Institutional propaganda operates not only through lies, but through distraction. What does not receive attention does not exist. Media ignorance is therefore a form of epistemic necropolitics: a way of producing absence, silence and indifference as instruments of government. Scientific and media institutions do not therefore operate in isolation: they are part of the same infrastructure that we have seen at work in archives and education. They all contribute to stabilising the social order through the production of ignorance. Science decides what can be studied; the media decides what can be seen; education decides what can be thought; archives decide what can be remembered. Ignorance is not a failure of the system: it is a component of the system itself.

If ignorance is a technology that cuts across archives, education, science and the media, then it is not a side effect of power, but one of its infrastructures. Social order is maintained not only through coercion, but also through the control, erasure and production of what can be seen, heard, remembered, studied and taught. Ignorance is a form of government.

But precisely because ignorance is produced, it can also be undone. Medina speaks of “epistemic resistance”¹⁵⁸ as the ability to create new interpretative resources, new languages, new forms of attention. Resistance consists not only in producing new knowledge, but in transforming the conditions that make knowledge possible. I will focus on the resistance in the next chapter.

Epistemic resistance is therefore a work of reconstruction: reconstructing archives, reconstructing curricula, categories, forms of attention. It is a slow, collective, often invisible work, but it is possibly

¹⁵⁸ Medina, 2013, pg 49

the only way to transform the infrastructure of ignorance into an infrastructure of justice.

2.4 Categorization, normativity and cognitive extraction

Extending the institutional machinery analyzed in 2.3, categorization emerges not as a neutral classificatory procedure but as a normative scaffolding of power. Categories constitute forms of conceptual life carrying worldviews, normative expectations, implicit hierarchies, to classify ordered reality but also to evaluate it, rendering some differences visible while occluding others, establishing normal/deviant, human/less-than-human divides. As Alcoff argues, social categories like gender, race, class, disability “do not merely describe positions but prescribe roles, expectations, possibilities”¹⁵⁹, stabilizing dominant identities as horizons while marginal experiences appear opaque or monstrous.

This normativity embeds categories within relational structures; Charlotte Witt’s *The Metaphysics of Gender* contends that these categories function “not as independent predicates but systems of internally related roles”¹⁶⁰, acquiring meaning through dense normative webs yielding material (embodiment), affective (shame/pride), and epistemic effects (whose voices are granted credibility and whose knowledge is discounted). Categories thus organize perception before cognition, determining what registers as object/event/subject, guiding the pre-reflective distribution of attention analyzed in 2.2. In Gilead, the title “Handmaid” exemplifies a totalizing normativity which extracts women’s reproductive

¹⁵⁹ Alcoff, 2006, pg 49

¹⁶⁰ Witt Charlotte, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pg 4

knowledge and reinterprets it patriarchally depriving them from autonomy¹⁶¹.

Cognitive extraction denotes this appropriative dynamic: dominant categories absorb subordinated knowledge, recording it through hegemonic frames while erasing its origins. Offred's pre-regime literacy, professional skills, intimate memories, are exploited for the regime's utility, her body is narrativized as a divine vessel, while her subjectivity is treated as a potential source of disobedience that must be tightly controlled. The category Handmaid naturalises Wives as the normative form of femininity, Marthas as domestically invisible labour, and Unwomen as epistemic non-entities exiled to the Colonies. Categories here do not merely describe; they actively produce social roles. The category Handmaid positions these women as deviant reproductive tools within the regime's normative order, their testimonies preemptively devalue for credibility deficits of 1.5, ensuring hermeneutical gaps¹⁶². Yet categories' relationality reveals fragility, because(?) meanings stabilize only through reiteration. In Butler's analysis, norms materialise through performative citation: they persist because they are repeatedly enacted, each repetition citing earlier ones and thereby giving the impression of naturalness. Gender norms, in this sense, are not fixed attributes but effects of reiterated practices that continually reproduce the categories they name. Handmaids' daily rituals reinscribe 'handmaid-ness', but micro-fissures appear: Offred's illicit glances, whispered names, and smuggled matches interrupt the performative repetition that sustains the category, subtly undermining its stability. Cognitive extraction relies on this constant reiteration: the category Handmaid preempts women's ability to articulate their own embodied knowledge, allowing the regime to appropriate that knowledge, such as fertility cycles, for its

¹⁶¹ Atwood, 1996, ch 13

¹⁶² Fricker, 2007, pg 148

own purposes Extraction is not merely epistemic but ontological: it reshapes what counts as a self, what counts as agency, and what forms of knowledge can be recognised as such. The Handmaid category functions as a totalising grid that pre-interprets women's bodies and experiences before they can speak them.

The violence of cognitive extraction lies in its asymmetry: the regime appropriates women's embodied knowledge while denying them any reciprocal authority to articulate, interpret, or benefit from it. Subordinated knowledge enters dominant frames denatured: for example, Offred's pre-Gilead friendships is recoded as sinful temptation, Moira's lesbian agency as Unwomanly pathology. Categories function as tools of extraction because they presuppose asymmetry. This mirrors Marisa Fuentes' account of archival violence (2.3), where only thin, distorted traces of enslaved women's lives are preserved, extracted into the archive for administrative utility while their voices and subjectivities remain unrecognised¹⁶³.

Gilead amplifies via biblical normativity, given that(?) categories drawn from scripture confer theological inevitability, naturalising extraction as divine economy. Exchanges of 'Blessed be the fruit' continually reinscribe Gilead's fertility hierarchy, reducing women to their reproductive function. Their bodies are semiotized as state-controlled wombs, symbols whose meaning is defined by the regime rather than by the women themselves. Yet the malleability of scripture exposes this constructedness: as Robinson-Greene notes, selective biblical quotation enables ideological extraction, just as Marx's words are misattributed to St Paul in the novel¹⁶⁴. Normative categories distribute epistemic authority asymmetrically, in Fricker testimonial injustice devalues Handmaid speech a priori, furthermore, hermeneutical injustice deprives interpretive resources (such as the

¹⁶³ Fuentes, 2016, pg 7

¹⁶⁴ Robinson-Greene, 2018, ch. 15, pg 47

absence of a term to refer to ceremonial rape). Medina call this *epistemic violence*¹⁶⁵, where categories not only misrecognize but preempt recognition, ensuring that the extracted knowledge stabilizes hierarchies. Extraction also operates effectively: categories script emotional repertoires, prescribing which feelings are available to Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, and Unwomen. This affective extraction is visible in the emotional repertoires scripted by the categories: Handmaids are trained to envy Wives as 'empty vessels', while Wives are trained to disdain Handmaids' 'polluted fertility'. These orchestrated emotions bind women against one another, obscuring their shared subjection to the same extractive system. Serena Joy's rage at Offred's pregnancy is not merely personal; it expresses a normative betrayal. Offred's fertility destabilises the boundary between Wife and Handmaid, and this category violation threatens the semiotic order that sustains Gilead's hierarchy. Politically, categories decide livability. Butler locates "unlivable lives" outside normative frames¹⁶⁶ Gilead's Unwomen, gender traitors, embody this extracted labor in the Colonies, cleaning up toxic material, without a categorical home. In the Colonies, cognitive extraction becomes literal necropolitics. The regime exploits women's survival knowledge, technical skills, and mutual-aid practices to sustain toxic labour sites: they rely on older women's know-how to ration food, purify water, care for the sick, and organise work. These forms of knowledge are extracted until bodily exhaustion makes them unusable, at which point the women are left to die. Extraction here is not only epistemic but material: the regime consumes their skills and their bodies simultaneously. Necropolitical extraction reveals the endpoint of categorical normativity: when a life no longer yields epistemic or material value, it becomes disposable. The Colonies function as the ultimate site where bodies and

¹⁶⁵ Medina, 2013, pg 114

¹⁶⁶ Butler, 1993, pg 19

knowledge are exhausted simultaneously, exemplifying how categorisation can fuse epistemic and biological depletion.

This normative machinery intersects 2.5's question: *who decides knowability?* Categories pre-judge: Handmaids' experiences are knowable only as fertility-metrics, Wives' dissent are knowable only as wifely failure. Extraction ensures that dominant groups control interpretive surplus value, while women's insights fuel regime without reciprocity. Yet relational fragility foreshadows contestation, categories require constant maintenance. Offred's mental mapping (for example, her remembering pre-Gilead names and Mayday whispers) micro-resists extraction, reclaiming cognitive autonomy. Such fissures expose normativity's dependence on ignorance (2.3) and power's architecture (2.2), culminating in the struggles for knowability that lie ahead. Categories thus reveal the intimate operation of power, which is not an external imposition but, rather, a constitutive grammar that naturalizes extraction as epistemology.

2.5 How Power Configures the Knowable?

The title question should not be read as invoking a sovereign agent who freely determines epistemic boundaries. Rather, it names the structural effects of epistemic positioning: power distributes who is able to function as a knower, and this distribution enables certain actors, such as the Commanders, to exercise epistemic authority. Their 'decisions' are not antecedent acts of will but outcomes of the very power structures that position them as arbiters of knowledge.

By concluding Chapter 2's machinery/power's architecture (2.2), institutional ignorance (2.3), normative categorization/extraction (2.4),

this section addresses the political crux: who arbitrates knowability's boundaries? Deciding what enters the field of the knowable determines what can be contested, claimed, transformed; what experiences gain nameability, intelligibility, social existence. Knowability does not constitute a neutral access but a sovereign prerogative of power regulating the epistemic threshold beyond which phenomena remain shadows, unspeakable, unthinkable. As Foucault frames regimes of truth¹⁶⁷, veridiction ensembles decide the separation between truth and false, attaching power-effects to "true" statements, to those who speak them, and to validation procedures. Knowability thus emerges as a site of struggle: epistemic structures condition the possibility of justice and the denial of it.

This arbitration operates in several stages. First, there are *authorized speakers*: knowability requires credible enunciators. Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice is fully operative here: Handmaids' whispers are dismissed *a priori* as hysterical or unreliable, while Commanders' scriptural exegeses are automatically granted epistemic authority¹⁶⁸. Medina call this *epistemic positioning*¹⁶⁹ categories (2.4) which assign privilege/marginality, determining whose voices cross the knowability threshold. Second, there are *interpretive frameworks*: knowability demands available hermeneutics. Hermeneutical marginalisation starves subordinated groups of collective resources articulating experiences. Women's knowledge enters only denatured which origins occluded. Institutional infrastructures enforce, archives document fertility metrics (not Handmaids' anguish), and curricula transmit biblical norms excluding alternatives. Third, there are *validation criteria*: knowability depends on evidence standards, which are often circularly biased. Mills' account of

¹⁶⁷ Foucault, 1980, pg 131

¹⁶⁸ Fricker, 2007, pg 11

¹⁶⁹ Medina, 2013, pg 114

white ignorance shows how dominant epistemic standards recognise only regime-aligned forms of justifications¹⁷⁰ (The epistemic order privileges scriptural citation over testimony: Commanders' interpretations count as truth, whereas Handmaids' firsthand accounts are discredited in advance). Gilead's 'participation' produces a collective judgment through mob ritual, rendering the killing knowable as justice rather than hysteria, even though the criteria for judgment are extracted from women's punitive labour while denying them interpretive agency. Tuana's notion of imposed ignorance shows how institutions actively suppress counter-evidence and transform misinformation into orthodoxy: fabricated abortion 'facts' are presented as medical truth, while genuine medical evidence is concealed, producing an official narrative that appears authoritative precisely because alternative knowledge has been structurally erased. Validation is never neutral: it is a political technology that determines which forms of suffering count as evidence and which are dismissed as noise. In Gilead, only those forms of knowledge that reinforce the regime's theological narrative are admissible, while experiential testimony is systematically downgraded.

Politically, knowability arbitration determines social existence; unnamed experiences evade recognition, unarticulated injustice persist unchallenged. Butler's livability says that beyond categorical norms, lives become unintelligible.¹⁷¹ Gilead Unwomen are not merely punished but epistemically void, given that their Colony knowledge is unextractable and hence irrelevant. Deciding knowability equates to deciding transformability: what cannot be named cannot be contested.

Gilead centralises this arbitration in the Commanders and Sons of Jacob. Through selective biblical extraction, they pluck malleable

¹⁷⁰ Mills, 1997, pg 18

¹⁷¹ Butler, 1993, pg 19

verses while suppressing contexts that might destabilize the frame, establishing scriptural monopoly as knowability's gatekeeper. Robinson-Greene observes how the Bible's very familiarity enables this operation¹⁷²: partial, fragmented knowledge suffices for regime extraction, while full access becomes subversively dangerous. The Japanese tourists' encounter in chapter 38 exemplifies arbitrated visibility: they have access to only curated Handmaid declarations of happiness, while internal atrocities remain categorically unknowable.

Institutional leaks (2.3) - Jezabel's smuggling pre-regime magazines - nonetheless introduce counter hermeneutics that challenge categorical monopoly, exposing the structural fragility of arbitration: centralised control requires perpetual enforcement. Offred's mental cartographies, preserving pre-Gilead names and Mayday signals, micro-encroach knowability thresholds through whispered transmission of unarbitrated experiences.

Knowability's political stakes are heightened by extraction's asymmetry: subordinated knowledge gains entry only if it is useful to the regime-useful, otherwise it is consigned to shadow. Handmaids' emotional labor – placating Wives, performing birthing rituals – becomes knowable as exemplary obedience rather than suppressed resistance potential. This dynamic echoes Dotson's epistemic oppression¹⁷³: a persistent exclusion that hinders contribution to knowledge, sustained by arbitration's denial of subordinated interpretive sovereignty. From an affective point of view, arbitration defines emotional plausibility itself: Wives' piety-grief registers as knowable pathos, while Handmaids' rage appears excessive and implausible. Medina *affective injustice*¹⁷⁴ illuminates how dominant horizons render subordinated pain epistemically unreal. Serena Joy's

¹⁷² Robinson-Greene, 2018, pg 45

¹⁷³ Dotson, 2014, pg 1

¹⁷⁴ Medina, 2013, ch 6

visceral envy toward Offred's pregnancy violates this normative arbitration, because Handmaids' fertility must remain knowable only on an instrumental level, but never an object of envy. Affective arbitration is crucial: emotions themselves become policed categories. What dominant groups feel is legible and legitimate; what subordinated groups feel is instead pathologised or erased. This emotional asymmetry reinforces the epistemic hierarchy by determining whose affective life can be taken as evidence.

Epistemically, arbitration closes the machinery's circuits: Sect. 1.5's testimonial devaluation feeds hermeneutical starvation, 2.4's categorical extraction reinforces 2.3's ignorance of infrastructures, then, 2.2's power architecture naturalizes the entire loop. Gilead's Eyes enforce their will through surveillance that preempts unsanctioned speech, deciding knowability via perpetual monitoring. Ultimately, the question "who decides what is knowable?" interrogates epistemology's political ontology: knowability constitutes no democratic common good but a contested enclosure. Foucault's capillary power (2.2) disperses arbitration across networks, yet hierarchies persist: Commanders as ultimate arbiters remain dependent on institutional/category relays. This enclosure conditions the fissures explored in Chapter 3: the very closure of Gilead's epistemic machinery generates the cracks explored in Chapter 3: its totalising completeness produces the conditions under which the system becomes questionable and its authority unstable.

2.6 Conclusions

The analyses developed in Chapter 2 converge toward a single insight: the machinery of meaning constitutes not an accidental

distortion of epistemic life but, in the fictional world of Gilead, a total apparatus through which power organises the very conditions of knowability, intelligibility, and social existence. While Gilead presents these mechanisms in their most extreme and closed form, the theoretical frameworks mobilised throughout this chapter - Foucault, Alcoff, Mills, Tuana, Dotson, Witt - also illuminate how analogous dynamics can operate, in partial and contested ways, within real-world institutions. The novel does not mirror contemporary societies directly; rather, it magnifies tendencies that critical theory identifies in attenuated, fragmented or reversible forms in democratic contexts.

What began as Chapter 1's diagnostic of epistemic silence, testimonial devaluation, hermeneutical marginalisation, credibility deficits, has unfolded into comprehensive mapping of power's productive operations: the architectural constitution of thought (2.2), the institutional manufacture of ignorance as artefact rather than void (2.3), the normative categorisation enabling asymmetric cognitive extraction (2.4), and the politically contested arbitration of the thresholds of knowability themselves (2.5). In Gilead, these mechanisms coalesce into a closed epistemic system. In democratic societies, by contrast, they emerge only partially and are continually counterbalanced by pluralism, contestation, and the presence of alternative epistemic agents.

Across these sections, power as thought's architect (2.2) appears in the novel as a complete epistemic enclosure, whereas in contemporary context it operates through more diffuse, reversible, and contested configurations. Institutions (2.3) in Gilead function as total producers of strategic ignorance; real institutions may reproduce similar patterns like archival silences, curricular exclusions and credibility asymmetries, yet always within more open epistemic

ecologies where dissenting publics, counter-archives and alternative knowledge practices remain possible.

Categories (2.4), which Alcott and Witt analyse in real-world settings, are radicalised in Gilead into rigid classificatory horizons that extracts subordinated experiential knowledge like women's reproductive expertise, emotional labour, interpretive capacities, while denying hermeneutic sovereignty to those who produce it. The novel thus dramatizes the stakes of categorisation: mechanisms that in our societies operate unevenly and are subjects to challenge appear in Gilead as crystallised and total. Knowability arbitration (2.5) exposes the political ontology sustaining this apparatus. In Gilead, the Commanders and Sons of Jacob monopolise veridiction, determining authorised speakers, interpretive frameworks, and validation criteria through scriptural extraction that renders alternatives grammatically unthinkable. In real societies, no single group exercises such total epistemic control, yet power can still concentrate authority in institutions such as courts, scientific bodies, media conglomerates, or religious authorities. The novel's exaggeration clarifies the stakes: the distribution of epistemic authority remains a political question even in non-totalitarian contexts.

Chapter 1's "violence without noise" now appears as an engineered epistemology circulating through perceptual habits, affective scripts, and institutional relays. In Gilead, these mechanisms form a closed loop; in real societies, they remain porous, contested, and subject to disruption. The comparison is heuristic: it reveals how epistemic exclusion can stabilise social hierarchies, whether in totalising or partial forms.

In closing, Chapter 2 suggests that epistemic structures constitute power's innermost architecture: they shape the conditions under which subjects recognise themselves, collective meanings gain

traction, and political realities endure. Gilead exposes these operations with totalitarian clarity, yet precisely this completeness generates interrogability: the more total the system, the more visible its points of strain. Real-world societies, by contrast, generate fissures not through totality but through plurality, conflict, and democratic disorder. The novel's hyperbolic enclosure thus helps illuminate how, in our own epistemic landscapes, freedom and contestation produce their own forms of friction and resistance.

Chapter 3 turns to these fissures, both within the novel and within contemporary epistemic life, examining how counter-narratives, conceptual frictions, and practices of resistance exploit structural dependencies to contest enclosures from within. Mapping the machinery is the first step toward counter-architecture: making visible the scaffoldings that organise perception, memory, and possibility, and reclaiming the capacity to name, interpret, and transform the worlds we inhabit.

Chapter 3 - Cracks in the system

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 uncovers a hidden vitality where domination appears most suffocating: the spontaneous fissures of epistemic resistance that – as Foucault has famously argued¹⁷⁵ – power generates naturally by itself or – in accordance with a Hegelian conception of social reality¹⁷⁶ – from the internal contradictions of power. Indeed, often resistance emerges not as external revolution or heroic opposition, but as quiet counter-movements, such as: atonal disobediences of attention reclaiming invisibilised realities, conceptual reappropriations hollowing categorical enclosures from within, or narrative gestures smuggling the unsayable into shared existence. These practices reveal a paradox at the heart of domination: the more totalising a system becomes, the more it exposes its own structure. Total control renders the machinery of power legible such as rituals, categories, and justificatory logics become visible precisely because they must be constantly performed. And the very need for continuous performance creates openings for slippage, misalignment, and resistance. In this sense, the grammatical completeness of the system produces its philosophical legibility: the architecture of domination becomes readable at the moment it strives to be airtight.

Gilead's transparent mercilessness makes this vitality crystalline. Handmaids recite "*Blessed be the fruit*" with private irony undercutting ritual gravity, OfGlen's "*Under His Eye*" hides Mayday signals in plain hearing, Scrabble creates unauthorized intimacy

¹⁷⁵ A paper where Foucault says so is Foucault Michel, *The subject and power*. In Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 208–26). Chicago: Chicago University Press.

¹⁷⁶ See Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

beyond regime grammar, and Moira transforms Jezebel's deviance into reclaimed pleasure. These fissures illustrate the central claim of Chapter 3: resistance does not require an external standpoint but emerges from the internal tensions of a totalising system. The very completeness of Gilead's epistemic order makes its contradictions more visible, and this visibility enables those contradictions to be named, interpreted, and mobilised. In this sense, the system's internal strains become the conditions under which resistance acquires conceptual clarity and political force.

At its heart, Chapter 3 defends an immanent conception of resistance. Power constitutes the grammatical conditions through which things become thinkable, yet resistance emerges from the aspects of experience that these categories cannot fully contain such as the residual perceptions, affects, embodied reactions that do not fit the regime's classificatory frame. These misalignments reveal the limits of the categories themselves and open conceptual space for alternative interpretations and forms of agency. Medina captures this beautifully by saying "resistance means active cultivation of disobedient imaginations"¹⁷⁷, multiperspectival habits against imposed single versions. Power extracts through categorical normativity, resistance resignifies meanings internally. Power arbitrates the criteria of veridiction, while resistance emerges from what those criteria exclude or cannot fully contain. The chapter argues that resistance does not require an external standpoint: it arises from the internal tensions generated by the attempt to establish total epistemic control. In Gilead, this attempt produces a high degree of analytic visibility — the system's mechanisms, contradictions, and justificatory logics become easier to discern precisely because they must be continuously articulated and enforced. In real-world societies, where no such

¹⁷⁷ Medina, 2013, pg 210

totalising closure exists, analytic visibility emerges instead from pluralism, contestation, and the coexistence of competing epistemic authorities. In both cases, domination is never complete, and it is this incompleteness, whether produced by totalising ambition or by democratic disorder that creates the conditions under which resistance becomes conceptually intelligible and politically actionable.

Chapter 3 unfolds these dynamics through three interconnected modalities. First, the attentional sabotage produced by epistemic riot confronts power at its deepest layer, the pre-reflective engineering of what is perceived as real. Medina's "disobedient gazes"¹⁷⁸ invert regime scripts: OfFred's stolen glance at OfGlen reclaims mutual recognition from mutual invisibility; averted eyes during Salvagings transmit contained anguish as solidarity; Moira's escape shifts from impossibility to realized agency. Second, conceptual agency refers to the capacity to reinterpret or subtly reconfigure the very categories imposed by the regime. Even when subjects cannot step outside these classificatory constraints, they can introduce small shifts in meaning that destabilise the framework from within. In this sense, resistance transforms the conceptual 'prison' created by the regime's categories through internal subversion rather than external escape. Butler's account of performativity — the idea that norms persist only because they are continually enacted and that each enactment is open to variation — reveals that norms survive only through contestable reiteration. Handmaid becomes privately the "body knowing its own betrayal"¹⁷⁹, Moira reworks *Jezebel* from pathology to pleasure sanctuary¹⁸⁰, Mayday smuggles pre-regime solidarity through regime lexicon. Third, counter-narratives dissolve the enclosure of truth through creative fabulation. OfFred's non-linear memories resurrect

¹⁷⁸ Ivi, pg 116

¹⁷⁹ Atwood, 1996, chapter 13

¹⁸⁰ Ivi, chapter 34

erased histories. The motto "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*"¹⁸¹ circulates as resistant mnemonic across Handmaid generations, meanwhile the academic epilogue reconstructs precisely what Gilead declared unthinkable.

Invoking all these modalities of resistance helps us answer Chapter 3's central philosophical question : if domination shapes the very conditions of knowability, where can the capacity for transformation reside? The answer lies in the fact that even the most ambitious attempt to establish total epistemic control remains structurally incomplete. Gilead aspires to totality, but its categories, rituals and norms can never fully determine experience or eliminate interpretive excess. It is within this constitutive incompleteness that resistance becomes possible. Power requires subjects to enact its norms through ritualised behaviours and repeated categorical performances. Yet these enactments are never perfectly controlled: every performance contains small deviations, every repetition exposes the constructed nature of the category and allows for subtle re-signification, and even public rituals of witnessing can generate unspoken forms of solidarity among spectators. These internal imperfections reveal that domination cannot fully determine meaning or subjectivity.

Gilead makes this power's structures concrete with totalitarian precision. Handmaids must *perform* Ceremony compliance while irony slips through recitation, they *recite* biblical orthodoxy while *Under His Eyes* encodes resistance. Resistance emerges not as utopian fantasy but structural inevitability, the shadow cast by power's totality itself. Chapter 3, therefore, leads us to an optimistic realism even where domination seems most absolute, since we can conclude that what power would render unthinkable instead persists, speaks, and

¹⁸¹ Translation: *Don't let the bastard grid you down.*

transforms. Chapter 3 shows that the attempt to establish total domination never succeeds in fully determining meaning or subjectivity. The small deviations, reinterpretations and solidarities that arise within the system reveal its structural incompleteness. Critical philosophy does not produce these acts of resistance, but it can analyse and articulate them, showing how possibilities for transformation emerge from within the very frameworks that seek to constrain them.

3.2 Resistance as Epistemic Riot

Epistemic resistance operates precisely in the domain where power seeks to exercise its most subtle and pre-reflective influence: the shaping of attention, which determines what appears as real, relevant, or even noticeable. Yet this attempt at total control is never fully successful. It is within the inevitable gaps and failures of this attentional governance that resistance takes root. Contemporary scholarship has expanded this field not by reiterating the well-established analyses of epistemic domination, but by introducing new conceptual tools that illuminate how resistance can operate within those very structures. Concepts such as epistemic friction, subversive citation, interpretive autonomy, and world-traveling shift the focus from diagnosing oppression to understanding the subtle, situated, and often pre-reflective practices through which subjects contest and reconfigure the frameworks that constrain them. Ludovica Marinaro's (2026) framework of "making structures as an act of

epistemic resistance"¹⁸² conceptualizes marginalized subjects constructing counter-landscapes against systematic erasure, reclaiming spatial and perceptual agency to redraw the very cartography of knowability, and transforming imposed invisibility into insurgent visibility through deliberate perceptual redesign. In Gilead, Handmaids perform this architectural revolt by weaving perceptual counter-maps through stolen glances during walks, which become foundational lines of invisible solidarity architectures that subvert the Eyes' panoptic spatial control, while averted eyes at Salvagings construct hidden relational topographies that unite isolated bodies against regime enclosure. Similarly, Giulia Ballatori's 2025 work "*Resistenze alla conoscenza e conoscenza come forma di r-esistenza*"¹⁸³ posits that excluded communities generate empowering counter-knowledges precisely to repair epistemic violence, transforming marginal whispers into world-making epistemologies that not only survive but actively reshape the epistemic terrain. Offred's mental cartographies of pre-Gilead streets and names exemplify this counter-memory, resurrecting erased continuities as insurgent knowledge that challenges the regime's archival annihilation from within the very architecture of memory.

The paper of Brunella Casalini published in *About Gender* collective analysis, in 2022, further equips the riot with intersectional precision, linking epistemic injustice directly to both structural vulnerability and privilege asymmetries, where resistance emerges as discursive reclamation that contests dominance at its foundational

¹⁸² Ludovica Marinaro, "Cartography of a Genocide. Fare Architettura come atto di resistenza epistemica," *Ri-Vista. Research for Landscape Architecture* 23, no. 2 (2026): 362–373.

¹⁸³ Giulia Ballatori, "Resistenze alla conoscenza e conoscenza come forma di r-esistenza," in *Itinerari del sapere. Teorie e pratiche della conoscenza in età contemporanea* Carocci, 2022.

grammar, turning imposed silence into polyphonic contestation¹⁸⁴. Handmaids' ironic recitation of *Blessed be the fruit*, laced with private subversion detectable only to fellow resistance fighters, embodies this discursive revolt, converting structural vulnerability into privilege-contesting discourse that multiplies voices, where the regime instead sought a monoculture. Justin Fugo diagnoses what she calls "the Hubris of the zero point" in dominant epistemologies that pretend to have a neutral objectivity which is instead a form of silencing violence. Against it, she advocates riotous methods that democratize knowledge through intersubjective multiplicity and the sharing of epistemic labor¹⁸⁵. The phrase "*Under His Eye*" also serves as a Mayday activation code. So, this can be seen as a social-linguistic mechanism that enacts Fugo's democratization, intersubjectivizing objectivity against the regime's claim to possess the unique divine truth while creating shared knowledge practices that evade centralized veridiction.

Invoking Omran and Yousafzai's intersectional studies, published in 2023, it is possible to demonstrate how resistance draws on suppressed epistemic resources against interlocking structures of occupation and patriarchy, generating forms of agencies from epistemic margins that convert exclusion into generative possibility¹⁸⁶. Moira's reclamation of Jezebel space mirrors this, revolt against resource exploitation, transforming decreed sexual deviance into an autonomous epistemic sanctuary where pre-regime pleasures and knowledge reemerge as tools for collective survival and subversion.

¹⁸⁴ Casalini Brunella, *Privilegi, svantaggi strutturali e vulnerabilità: tra ingiustizie epistemiche e discorsive*, *About Gender*, Vol 11, n 21, pg 208-228, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Fugo Justine, *Beyond the 'hubris of the zero point': Methods for resisting epistemic oppression*, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Omran Wojdan, Yousafzai Shumaila, *Epistemic injustice and epistemic resistance: An intersectional study of women's entrepreneurship under occupation and patriarchy*, vol. 48, n. 4, Cardiff, 2023.

These contemporary frameworks converge powerfully in Gilead's riotous practices, where Handmaids' microgesture generate transformative epistemic multiplicity that scales from individual perception to collective worldmaking. OfFred's glance at OfGlen during their mandatory walks breaks their enforced anonymity instantaneously, instantiating Marinaro's architectural resistance by connecting co-conspirators' territories invisibly across the regime surveillance in public places and forging relational architectures that persist beyond the moment of eye contact¹⁸⁷. Averted eyes at Salvagings¹⁸⁸, mandated by the regime as perceptual discipline, exemplify the concept of counter-memory, introduced by Ballatori, in real practice, containing anguish circulating as empowering counter-knowledge that unites isolated subjects into epistemic collective, repairing the exclusion of mutual recognition through shared perceptual refusal. Serena Joy and her involuntary rage upon discovering OfFred's pregnancy fissures the rigid Wife/Handmaid binaries exactly as *About Gender* theorizes the reclamation of vulnerability, with envy transmuting into a shared recognition of precariousness that undermines the regime's categorical division from an unexpected emotional vector¹⁸⁹. The Japanese tourists encounter choreographed declarations of "happiness" by the Handmaids but the women's intentional subtle performative dissonance – such as gazes that meet *just* slightly too long, tones slightly off-script –enacts the contestation of Fugo's zero point, rendering the show visibly spectacular and exposing the curated present as a contestable artifice rather than a natural reality¹⁹⁰. Moira's escape narrative, circulating through whispers among Handmaids, functions as an intersectional

¹⁸⁷ Atwood, 1996, ch 5.

¹⁸⁸ Public executions staged by the regime of Gilead, usually carried out by a group of Handmaids who are forced to participate in killing the condemned person. See episode 1x08 of the series for any visual references.

¹⁸⁹ *Ivi*, ch 36.

¹⁹⁰ *Ivi*, ch 38.

resource activation, as described by Omran and Yousafzai, , like Unwomanly impossibility reframed as autonomous possibility that catalyses collective agency, drawing on suppressed pre-Gilead knowledge to fuel resistance infrastructure.

The most important way to understand “epistemic riot” is not as a metaphor for rebellion in general, but as an indicator of the point at which resistance begins to reorganise the conditions under which knowledge can appear, circulate and count as real knowledge. In the former chapter, the focus was on power’s capture of attention and visibility, here the emphasis shifts to what oppressed subjects do once that capture is already in place: they build a counter-space of intelligibility inside the very system that tries to make them epistemically absent. So epistemic riot is not only a reaction to silencing, it is the active production of shared intelligibility, the creation of routes through which excluded experience can become communicable, credible and politically actionable.

All this matters because the concept of epistemic riot has stronger implications than those of the generic idea of “speaking back.” Speaking back can still remain trapped inside the dominant frame, because it answers the regime without changing the regime’s criteria of relevance. Epistemic riot goes further: it breaks the regime’s monopoly over what counts as reality, what counts as evidence, and who counts as a legitimate knower. It therefore refers to not just a discursive opposition, but a form of epistemic reorganization. Fricker’s distinction between testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice is fundamental here: the first concerns how a speaker’s credibility is unjustly downgraded, the second concerns how an experience remains hard to name because the interpretive resources are missing¹⁹¹. Epistemic riot is the insurgent response to both. It contests

¹⁹¹ Fricker, 2007, pg 17-53.

the devaluation of speakers and simultaneously generates the missing interpretive resources from below.

This is where Josè Medina is especially useful. In his works, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, and later *The Epistemology of Protest*, resistance is not treated as passive endurance but as an active, collective and imaginative labor that changes the social distribution of voice, hearing and recognition. Epistemic riot can therefore be understood as a practice of epistemic reassembly, where fragments of memory, coded speech, mutual recognition and resistant imagination are linked into a counter-public infrastructure of knowledge. The important point is that this infrastructure is not necessarily institutionalized. It can be fragile, improvised and partial, yet still effective because it opens a shared world where there was previously only isolation and managed ignorance.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead is a regime that governs bodies by governing meaning. This is why the Ceremony is such a decisive example. It is rape, but the regime renders it as sacred ritual, which means that power controls not only the event but the interpretive frame surrounding it. Epistemic riot begins when the vocabulary no longer fully contains the experience. OfFred's narrative voice is important here because it preserves a counter-description of the same event. Her hesitations, self corrections, and memories are not signs of epistemic weakness, they are the form taken by resistant knowledge under pressure. Even when she cannot speak openly, she refuses to let the regime's meaning become definitive.

That refusal is politically significant because domination often works by making oppression feel inevitable. Gilead does not merely punish dissent; it trains subjects to believe that dissent is meaningless or impossible. Epistemic riot interrupts this by showing that the regime's categories are contingent rather than natural. Moira's escape

matters in exactly this way. It is not only a political act; it is an epistemic rupture, because it proves that what the regime presents as impossible can in fact be imagined, and consequently achieved. Medina's account of protest helps clarify why this matters: protest is communicative, not just expressive. It reorganizes the public space in which new meanings can emerge. Moira's story, when told, does exactly that for Gilead. It cracks open the regime's claim to total closure.

A further clarification is useful here. Epistemic riot is not simply "having a voice." It is the collective generation of counter-infrastructure. That means creating channels through which experience can circulate despite a hostile epistemic environment. This is why even small exchanges in the novel matter so much. A whispered story, a remembered name, a coded phrase, or a slight shift in tone can function as a bridge from private injury to shared recognition. The point is not just that the Handmaids resist individually, but that they begin to form a provisional common world. This is exactly what makes the concept of epistemic riot different from that of individual empowerment: it is not about private self-assertion, but about shared intelligibility.

Charles Mills helps us refine this further. His account of white ignorance shows that ignorance is not neutral absence of knowledge but structured, socially maintained non-knowing that protects power¹⁹². Epistemic riot is the counter-force to that structure. It does not just add correct information, it destabilizes the very authority of the record. This is why the concept is politically stronger than that of a simple correction. We can speak of a mere correction when the system is basically sound except for some false beliefs. We speak of epistemic riot, on the other hand, when the system itself is part of the

¹⁹² Mills, 1997, pg 18.

problem because it coordinates ignorance, credibility and attention in ways that sustain domination.

Justin Fugo's critique of the '*zero-point hubris*' sharpens this point: it exposes the illusion of a neutral, all-seeing standpoint and shows that claims to epistemic totality are themselves forms of domination. Fugo argues that dominant epistemologies falsely present themselves as neutral and universal, while in reality they are essentially structured through exclusions that erase alternative knowers. Gilead operates in precisely this way. It claims divine objectivity while actually imposing a violently partial order. Epistemic riot resists this by exposing the regime's claim to neutrality as an epistemic deception. So, the riot is not just a struggle over content; it is a struggle over who gets to speak from the position that pretends to be nowhere and everywhere at once. That is a deeper epistemic battle than a mere contradiction, because it attacks the authority of the structure behind the claim to truth. Sarah Bufkin's recent work on epistemic injustice and ideology critique gives another useful layer. Her point is that ideology is not only a set of false beliefs; it is a structure that makes domination appear normal and inevitable, and therefore hard to contest. That is exactly what Gilead does through ritual, formula, and repetition. The Ceremony has to be narrated as sacred. Handmaids have to be made legibly passive. Wives have to function as moral witnesses. The entire system depends on interpretive labor, and epistemic riot disrupts that labor from within. It reveals that the regime's "normality" is manufactured, maintained, and therefore vulnerable.

A regime like Gilead becomes stronger when each subject believes her experience is singular, private, or unspeakable. Riot reverses that by making experiences mutually legible. This is why the concept is so important for the general theme of our chapter: it

captures the transition from isolated suffering to shared epistemic space. Medina's resistant imagination is crucial here, because it shows that subjects do not merely negate what is imposed on them; they imagine each other as co-knowers and co-resistors.

A temporal dimension must also be considered. Epistemic riot does not only describe the present more accurately; it preserves futures that domination tries to foreclose. When OfFred remembers the past, or when Moira's escape circulates as rumor and possibility, the riot is already weakening the regime's claim that no other future can exist. This matters because domination often depends on making the future feel closed. Epistemic riot reopens contingency. It says, in effect, that if another interpretation is possible, another world is also possible.

Therefore, in a more precise formulation, epistemic riot is the collective and disruptive practice through which oppressed subjects create shared intelligibility under conditions of epistemic siege. It is not merely the expression of dissent, and it is not simply voice recovery. It is the active making of a counter-world of meaning: fragile, improvised, and partial, but real. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, that counter-world appears in memory-work, coded speech, mutual recognition, and the refusal to accept Gilead's self-description as definitive. That is why the concept of epistemic riot matters. It refers to the moment in which the oppressed stop simply surviving the world imposed on them and begin to rebuild the conditions under which another world can become thinkable.

This dynamic is not limited to Gilead. In the real world, epistemic riot names the collective process through which oppressed groups create the conditions for their experiences to become intelligible and politically consequential. From feminist and anti-racism movements, to indigenous and disability activism, these practices generate new

vocabularies, shared testimonies and alternative interpretive frameworks that transform previously silenced experiences into credible and actionable knowledge.

3.3 Conceptual Agency and Interpretative Sabotage

Conceptual agency is the second decisive movement of epistemic resistance and it operates at a level distinct from the attentional disruptions examined in Section 3.2. Where “epistemic riot” names the moment at which oppressed subjects refuse to let managed invisibility go uncontested, “conceptual agency” names something more complex: the capacity to inhabit, stretch and ultimately transform the very concepts through which domination defines its subjects. This shift in emphasis is important, epistemic riot disrupts what can be perceived whereas conceptual agency works on what can be named, and therefore on what can be thought, claimed and acted upon. The two movements reinforce each other, but they are not the same, and conflating them would lead us to lose the specific philosophical contribution that the second makes.

What makes conceptual agency a necessary addition to our analysis of power is the recognition that oppression is not only a matter of making things hidden or invisible. It is also, and perhaps more insidiously, a matter of making things visible in the wrong way, by labelling, classifying, and assigning meaning before the oppressed subject has any opportunity to speak. Power does not simply suppress experience; it pre-empts the articulation of experience by saturating the conceptual field with categories that foreclose alternative interpretations. In Gilead, this operation is totalising. A Handmaid is not merely watched, she is ontologically installed into a function

before she opens her mouth. A Wife is not merely privileged, she is conceptually framed as a morally superior witness to a subordination she helps to administer. A Commander is not merely powerful, he is installed as the sole legitimate interpreter of law, scripture, and social reality itself. These are not descriptions that attach to pre-existing subjects; they are, in Butler's terms, performative assignments that actually produce the subjects they appear to describe¹⁹³.

Conceptual agency begins where these assignments are no longer entirely accepted as fixed. It operates through redefinition, irony, double meaning, and what Medina calls disobedient imagination, "the active cultivation of alternative ways of inhabiting the concepts one has been assigned"¹⁹⁴. It is not revolutionary in the classical sense, it does not require access to an external position from which the entire system can be overturned. It works instead from within, exploiting the instabilities that any system of conceptual enforcement must generate through its own perpetual demand for compliance.

Before turning to the forms that this form of sabotage takes in Atwood's novel, it is necessary to complicate the standard account of how conceptual injustice works. The dominant view, rooted in Fricker's foundational analysis of hermeneutical injustice, holds that marginalized subjects suffer from a gap in the available conceptual resources: they lack the tools to name and communicate their experiences, and this lack is itself a product of injustice¹⁹⁵. The paradigm case is sexual harassment before the term existed: women who experienced it could not render it intelligible to themselves or to others, not because the experience was any less real, but because the interpretive infrastructure required to name it as a specific wrong was

¹⁹³ Butler, 1993.

¹⁹⁴ Medina, 2013, pg 197-231.

¹⁹⁵ Fricker, 2007, pg 147-175.

absent. Ariana Falbo's important contribution in 2022 to this debate demonstrated that this account, while essential, is incomplete¹⁹⁶. There is a type of hermeneutical injustice that does not arise from the absence of conceptual resources but from their distorting overabundance. Falbo identifies what she calls "hermeneutical distortion": a condition in which oppressive concepts are so dominant, so thoroughly saturated into the shared interpretive framework, that they crowd out, defeat, or pre-empt the application of more accurate hermeneutical resources. The harm is not that no concept exists for the experience; the harm is that a wrong concept exists and functions to block the right one. In these cases, simply filling in the gap is not enough. The distorting concept must be actively dislodged.

Gilead exemplifies this structure with exceptional clarity. The problem for Handmaids is not that no category exists for the Ceremony: the category "sacred ritual" is ubiquitously available and institutionally enforced. The problem is that this category displaces the more accurate description - rape - by surrounding it with an architecture of scriptural legitimation, procedural solemnity, and affective coercion that makes the accurate description feel not merely forbidden but inconceivable. Offred knows, at some level, that what is happening is rape; but the word itself barely survives in her narration, flickering in and out of access, crowded out by the regime's interpretive apparatus¹⁹⁷. The Ceremony is a paradigm case of what Falbo calls a hermeneutical clash: two interpretive frameworks – one dominant and distorting, one marginal and accurate – competing for the right to organize the same experience. The distorting concept does not suppress the accurate one by brute force; it suppresses it by

¹⁹⁶ Falbo Ariana, *Hermeneutical Injustice: Distortion and Conceptual Aptness*, *Hypatia* vol 37, n. 2.

¹⁹⁷ Atwood, 1996, pg 94. For an analysis of Offred's narration as epistemic labour, see also Tomc Sandra, *The Missionary Position: Feminisms and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, *Canadian Literature* pg 138-139.
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pre-emptively organising the conditions under which any interpretation must take place.

Similarly, the category "Jezebel" does not simply fail to provide an accurate description of their situation. It actively displaces a more adequate vocabulary of coercion, exploitation, and sexual slavery by framing the women's presence there as a consequence of their own moral deviance. The concept of deviance does not describe a pre-existing property; it produces the conditions under which any alternative account becomes morally unintelligible. A Jezebel who claims to have been a victim of coercion is, within the regime's framework, already epistemically disqualified: her testimony is pre-emptively devalued by the very category that names her. This is Fricker's testimonial injustice operating at the level of the concept itself – not merely a credibility deficit applied to a speaker, but a credibility structure built into the name¹⁹⁸. What Falbo's analysis adds to Fricker's account is the recognition that resistance, in conditions of hermeneutical distortion, cannot consist merely in articulating the absent concept. It must consist in the active displacement of the saturating and distorting concept – thus, not supplementation but sabotage. And this is precisely what conceptual agency in Gilead attempts.

Haslanger's notion of "ameliorative analysis" provides the philosophical scaffolding for understanding how conceptual sabotage is possible without access to an external position¹⁹⁹. Ameliorative analysis does not ask what a concept means in its current usage, since that would merely reproduce the distortion, but rather what concept we should adopt, given our legitimate social and political aims. It is, in Haslanger's terms, a revisionary rather than a descriptive or purely conceptual exercise. The goal is not to clarify what people currently

¹⁹⁸ Falbo, 2022, pg 348-354.

¹⁹⁹ Haslanger, 2012, pg 365-395.

mean by “woman” or “handmaid” but to work toward the concept that would best serve the aims of justice and recognition. This is a practice that can be conducted in conditions of oppression, because it does not require institutional authority or collective agreement, it can begin in the privacy of thought, in the margins of memory or in the fractional deviation of tone.

OfFred's narration throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* is the sustained performance of exactly this kind of ameliorative practice. Her constant corrections and hesitations—"a chair, a lovely one, really, in the abstract. I can't sit in it"—are not signs of epistemic weakness or stylistic indecision²⁰⁰. They are the textual traces of a subject who refuses to let the regime's vocabulary settle into finality. When OfFred names what happens in the Ceremony as "not making love" and struggles toward the word that the regime has rendered unspeakable, she is performing an ameliorative act: insisting on the conceptual revision that the regime's hermeneutical apparatus works to make impossible²⁰¹. Her narration is not testimony in the conventional sense – she has no audience, no legal standing, no institutional validation – but it is conceptual labor: the ongoing effort to maintain, against all pressure, the distinction between what the regime says is happening and what she knows to be happening.

This labor has a collective dimension that is as important as the individual one. Medina's account of resistant imagination emphasises that conceptual agency cannot be sustained in isolation; it requires what he calls "epistemic friction" – the productive conflict that arises when multiple perspectives resist the homogenising pull of a dominant interpretive framework²⁰². Isolated subjects may maintain private counter-descriptions, but these remain fragile and vulnerable

²⁰⁰ Atwood, 1996, pg 17

²⁰¹ Ivi, pg 94

²⁰² Medina, 2013, pg 50-89

to erosion under sustained pressure. What makes conceptual resistance durable is its transmission: the sharing, through whatever channels are available, of alternative ways of naming experience. In Gilead, this transmission occurs through whisper networks, through the coded exchange of stories, through the tactical use of language that means one thing to the regime and something else to those who know how to listen. The phrase “Under His Eye” functions as one of the most precise illustrations of this double-coding. As a mandatory farewell formula, it performs exactly the function proper to what Section 1.4 has identified as an illocutionary act: it enacts submission, acknowledges surveillance and performs the subject’s own complicity in her monitoring. But for those who know its Mayday function, the phrase simultaneously performs an entirely different illocutionary act: it identifies a possible fellow member of the resistance network, signals safe passage and activates a counter-institutional affiliation. The same words thus inhabit two conceptual frameworks simultaneously, one imposed from above and one maintained from below, and the regime’s coercive grammar become the vehicle for its own subversion²⁰³. This is what it means to sabotage interpretation from within: not to invent a new language but to exploit the instability of the one that has been imposed.

The philosophical literature on conceptual engineering has in recent years developed a sophisticated framework for understanding how concepts can be deliberately revised to better serve epistemic and political aims. Herman Cappelen’s *Fixing Language* and the collection edited by Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett analyse the mechanisms through which concepts change, through argument, advocacy, institutional pressure, and discursive intervention, and ask what norms should govern such changes. This theoretical framework

²⁰³ Atwood, 1996, pg 28

clarifies what is at stake in conceptual agency and interpretative sabotage: it shows that reworking concepts is not a marginal linguistic exercise but a politically charged intervention in the very architecture of meaning. When oppressed groups reinterpret or subvert imposed categories, they are participating in the same processes of conceptual revision that these authors describe, but from a position of resistance rather than authority²⁰⁴. This literature is, however, primarily concerned with deliberate, top-down conceptual revision: the explicit proposal, by theorists or activists operating in relatively open discursive conditions, of new or revised concepts for adoption by a broader community. The situation of Handmaids in Gilead is precisely the inverse. They are not in a position to propose revised concepts publicly; their capacity for public speech is structurally eliminated. The real world presents a different configuration: while many oppressed groups face structural barriers to public speech, their voices are not eliminated in the absolute sense. They can and do intervene in the public conceptual landscape, through activism, scholarship, testimony, and collective mobilisation, reshaping the very categories that once excluded them. The question that conceptual agency poses in their context is not how to engineer better concepts from a position of relative discursive freedom, but how to preserve and transmit conceptual alternatives under conditions of enforced conceptual uniformity. This is what might be called conceptual engineering from below: the grassroots, clandestine, necessarily improvised work of maintaining interpretive plurality inside a system designed to eliminate it.

Podosky's (2024) important critique of dialogical individualism in conceptual engineering is relevant here²⁰⁵. Podosky argues that approaches that locate conceptual change in individual speech acts or

²⁰⁴ Cappelen Herman, *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pg 1-45

²⁰⁵ Podosky Paul-Mikhail Catapang, *Why Conceptual Engineers Should Resist Dialogical Individualism*, *Topoi* vol 43 n. 5, 2024, pg 1671-1682

dyadic dialogues systematically underestimate the extent to which conceptual revision is a collective, socially embedded process. Concepts stabilize and change through the dynamics of communities, not through the isolated decisions of individuals. Applied to Gilead, this means that the conceptual agency of individual Handmaids – however significant as individual acts of resistance – becomes epistemically consequential only to the extent that it is embedded in collective networks of alternative meaning-making. OfFred's private resistance matters; but it matters most because it is connected, however tenuously, to the Mayday network, to the oral transmission of Moira's story, to the whispered exchange of names that keeps alive the memory of other ways of being named.

The inscription "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" - scratched into the closet of OfFred's room by a previous Handmaid - is perhaps the novel's most compressed illustration of conceptual engineering from below²⁰⁶. As an object, the inscription is trivial: a fragment of pseudo-Latin used to express a piece of deliberately coarse vernacular defiance. But the epistemic function that fulfills in the context of Gilead is far from trivial. It proves that someone was here before, thought differently, and found a way to leave a trace. It creates a lineage, a connection across time between subjects who share an oppressive situation but have no other way to communicate. And it transmits not just a sentiment but a conceptual stance: the refusal to accept the regime's self-description as definitive and the insistence that a perspective of one's own still exists, a place from which the regime's categories can be judged rather than simply absorbed. The inscription is, in Haslanger's terms, an ameliorative act: it does not describe things as they are but insists on how they should be understood²⁰⁷.

²⁰⁶ Atwood, 1996, pg 62

²⁰⁷ Haslanger, 2012, pg 385-390

Moirra's trajectory across the novel offers the most sustained and philosophically rich case of conceptual agency in Atwood's narrative. Her refusal to accept any categories the regime attempts to impose on her does not take the form of heroic external opposition, but it takes the form of strategic conceptual mobility: an ongoing refusal to be stably installed within any of the regime's classificatory schemes. Her first escape from the Red Center is, at one level, a practical act: she leaves. But simultaneously a conceptual act of the highest order. The regime has constructed the category "Handmaid" as total and inescapable, the category does not merely describe a role but constitutes a mode of being from which exit is, by definition, impossible. A Handmaid who escapes is, within the regime's framework, a logical contradiction: she is either recaptured, demonstrating that escape was always impossible, or she becomes an Unwoman, demonstrating that the only alternative to compliance is erasure. Moirra's escape does something that neither of these narratives accommodates, it demonstrates that the category is not, in fact total, that there is a Handmaid who escaped, and this is a new concept, a new possibility and a new interpretative resource for everyone who hears the story²⁰⁸.

The circulation of Moirra's story among Handmaids is therefore not merely a rumor. It is a piece of conceptual infrastructure: a shared interpretive resource that makes thinkable a form of existence the regime has declared impossible. As Medina argues, one of the key functions of resistant imagination is precisely this: the reservation and transmission of possibilities that dominant frameworks work to foreclose²⁰⁹. Moirra's story does not just inspire individual courage, it provides the conceptual materials, the category "woman who

²⁰⁸ Atwood, 1996, pg 133-139

²⁰⁹ Medina, 2013, pg 197-231

escaped”, that allow others to begin to imagine their own situation differently.

The second phase of Moira's story, her presence at Jezebel's, appears, on a surface reading, as defeat. She has been recaptured and installed in the regime's brothel. But Atwood's narrative is way more complex than this. Moira's inhabitation of the Jezebel category is not passive acceptance, it is strategic resignification. Within the regime's framework, "Jezebel" names a category of irredeemably deviant women, defined by their unsuitability for any socially productive role. Moira inhabits this category while simultaneously emptying it of its condemnatory meaning, treating the space of Jezebel not as the site of her degradation but as a zone of relative autonomy, where something of pre-Gilead identity and sociality can be preserved²¹⁰. She reclaims from the imposed category a margin of agency that the category was designed to eliminate. This is precisely what Butler means by "reworking" the norm: not transcending it but occupying it differently, finding within its structure the possibilities it was designed to foreclose²¹¹. This resignification has limits that must be acknowledged. Moira's position at Jezebel is still coerced, the margin of agency she preserves is real but narrow, and the regime benefits from the existence of the Jezebel category in ways that her individual reworking does not fundamentally disrupt. Conceptual agency is not liberation, it does not dissolve the structures within which it operates. What it does is maintain, within those structures, the possibility of a different relationship with their categories, a refusal of full interpellation that keeps alive both the subjects who refuse and the conceptual alternative that the refusal enacts.

There is a temporal dimension to conceptual agency that deserves separate attention because it connects the individual acts of

²¹⁰ Atwood, 1996, pg 242-255

²¹¹ Butler, 1993, 219-224

resistance in the novel's present to the broader project of interpretive reconstruction that the narrative performs. Domination is not only a condition of the present; it is a strategy for the future. By destroying archives, prohibiting literacy, replacing names with functional designations, and enforcing a single interpretive framework as self-evidently correct, Gilead attempts to make its own categories permanent, not merely the categories available in the present but the categories available to those who will come after. This is what Section 2.3 identified as temporal erasure: the management of memory as a technique of governance. The regime does not merely control what can be known now; it works to ensure that what cannot be known now cannot be recovered later. The destruction of personal identity, of historical continuity, of the archives through which alternative pasts could be accessed, is a strategy directed as much at future subjects as at present ones.

Conceptual agency in Atwood's novel responds to this temporal strategy with its own counter-temporal practice: the preservation of interpretive resources for future use. Offred's narration is not merely self-expression, it is an act of archival creation, the construction of a counter-record against the regime's official silence. Her insistence on naming, on remembering, on maintaining the double vision that allows her to see what the regime says is happening and what she knows is happening simultaneously, is an act of conceptual conservation: she is keeping alive, for whoever comes after, the interpretive vocabulary that Gilead is working to erase²¹².

The academic epilogue, the Historical Notes, performs the final and most politically complex act of conceptual reclamation in the novel. Professor Pieixoto's reconstruction on Offred's narrative situates

²¹² On the archival function of Offred's narration, see J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, 139–166.

her account within the framework of academic historiography, restoring her testimony to institutional legibility. This is, in one sense, a vindication: Offred's counter-record has survived, has been found, and has been recognised as evidence. But it is also a cautionary illustration of the limits of institutional reclamation. Pieixoto's framing restores the testimony within a new conceptual apparatus, academic historiography, that brings its own distortions²¹³; the very act of institutionalising Offred's account risks domesticating its radical claims, assimilating her resistant voice into the categories of scholarly objectivity that she herself would recognise as complicit in precisely the kind of the epistemic authority she was resisting. This recognition, however, occurs only after the fall of the regime, and even then it is deeply ambivalent: Offred's account is acknowledged as a historical document, but not as a political voice. Pieixoto's institutional framing grants her a form of post-hoc visibility while simultaneously domesticating her testimony, absorbing it into scholarly categories that blunt the force of her resistant perspective. This ambivalence is philosophically important. It demonstrates that conceptual agency does not guarantee conceptual justice. The concepts through which resistant knowledge is eventually recognised may themselves be inadequate to the experience being recognised. The struggle over naming is not resolved by the act of naming; it continues in every interpretive framework that claims to do justice to what has been named. This is why Medina insists that epistemic resistance must be understood as an ongoing practice rather than a project with a determinate end: the work of keeping conceptual alternatives alive,

²¹³ Atwood, 1996, pg 311-324. *For a critical analysis of the Historical Notes, see Madonne Miner, "Trust Me": Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale,* Twentieth Century Literature 37, no. 2 (1991): 148-168.

transmitting them across time, and resisting their re-absorption into dominant frameworks is never complete²¹⁴.

It would be a mistake to conclude this section on an entirely optimistic note. Conceptual agency is real, but it operates under severe constraints that must be acknowledged if the analysis is to be honest about what resistance can and cannot achieve within the conditions that Gilead represents. And these constraints matter not because Gilead is real, but because the dynamics it dramatizes are recognisable, though less extreme, in our own societies.

The first constraint is the asymmetry of resources. Dominant groups control the institutional infrastructure of concept production and transmission: the schools, the archives, the media, the legal frameworks through which concepts acquire public authority and durable social currency. Subordinated groups operating without access to these resources must conduct their conceptual work through improvised, unofficial, and often invisible channels. The concepts they produce are fragile by comparison: easily suppressed, easily isolated, easily dismissed as individual deviance rather than recognised as collective knowledge. Falbo's analysis of hermeneutical distortion is again relevant here: even when accurate concepts exist, they can be prevented from gaining traction by the sheer weight of the distorting concepts that surround them²¹⁵. This is not unique in Gilead, it is visible in contemporary struggles over naming gendered violence, racialised policing, environmental injustice or disability discrimination.

The second constraint is what Mills calls epistemic privilege, or rather its absence. Marginalized subjects who resist the dominant framework are easily disqualified as biased, irrational or self interested precisely because they resist it. Their conceptual alternatives can be

²¹⁴ Medina, 2013, pg 297-310; Medina, 2023, pg 1-30.

²¹⁵ Falbo, 2022, 355-361.

dismissed as the products of individual pathology rather than recognised as contributions to collective understanding. This is a deeply circular structure: the authority required to challenge dominant concepts is itself distributed by a system that depends on those concepts for its legitimacy²¹⁶. Conceptual agency must work against this circularity without being able to simply step outside it. Contemporary debates about who is deemed a “credible” witness, whose testimony counts as evidence, and whose interpretations are treated as overreactions or distortions show how persistent this dynamic remains.

The third constraint is the risk of co-optation. Concepts that begin as tools of resistance can be absorbed, domesticated and turned against their original purposes by dominant institutions. The history of feminist and anti-racist conceptual innovation is full of cases in which terms originally coined to name and contest specific forms of oppression were subsequently adopted by dominant discourses and emptied of their political content. This risk is not abstract in the context of *Gilead*: the epilogue's academic framing of Offred's testimony is a reminder that the recognition of resistant knowledge always takes place within interpretive frameworks that are themselves sites of power. But the same risk is visible today when terms like “empowerment,” “diversity,” or “resilience” are appropriated by institutions in ways that neutralise their critical force.

These constraints do not nullify conceptual agency; they define the conditions under which it must operate. And what Atwood's novel ultimately demonstrates is that these constraints, however severe, do not make resistance impossible. They make it fragile, partial, and vulnerable to reversal. But fragility is not the same as ineffectiveness. The counter-concepts that circulate among Handmaids—the word for

²¹⁶ Mills, 2007, pg 13-38.

rape, the concept of escape, the category of co-conspirator rather than competitor—are real epistemic achievements even within a system designed to make them unthinkable. They are, in Medina's formulation, "epistemic resources produced from the margins": fragile, improvised, and partial, but genuinely productive of a shared world in which something other than Gilead's self-description can take hold²¹⁷.

And this is precisely why Gilead matters for us. It is not a prophecy, but a warning: a conceptual model of what happens when public meaning becomes monopolised, when dissenting voices are structurally disqualified, and when resistant concepts are either crushed or co-opted. Our societies face their own forms of epistemic contraction—through disinformation, institutional opacity, polarisation, and the erosion of shared interpretive frameworks. The point is not that we live in Gilead, but that we can drift toward its logic if we fail to recognise and contest these pressures. Conceptual agency, however fragile, is one of the mechanisms through which such drift can be resisted. It is part of the work of keeping our societies open—epistemically as well as politically—so that alternative futures remain thinkable."

3.4 Counter-narratives, Imagination and Friction

The preceding sections have examined resistance as it operates at the level of attention and at the level of concept. Section 3.2 showed how the pre-reflective filters through which phenomena enter consciousness can be disrupted from below; Section 3.3 showed how the very categories through which domination defines its subjects carry within them the structural instability that makes sabotage possible. This section turns to a third modality of resistance, one that is

²¹⁷ Medina, 2013, pg 279.

distinct from the former ones and yet cannot function without them: the production of counter-narratives and the epistemic friction they generate.

The distinction between these three modalities matters. Attentional disruption works on what can be perceived, meanwhile conceptual agency works on what can be named. Counter-narrative works on what can be transmitted, remembered and made collectively available as a resource for understanding. Its object is not the immediate object of perception, nor the single categorial assignment, but the broader temporal and conceptual structure within which experience acquires meaning and communicability. Counter-narratives are the vehicles through which isolated and suppressed knowledge crosses the boundary from private injury to shared recognition, from individual suffering to a common world in which that suffering can be named, evaluated and contested. They are, in the most precise sense, epistemic infrastructure: not the content of resistance but the medium through which resistant content becomes socially durable.

Understanding counter-narratives in this way requires resisting two tempting but inadequate conceptualizations. The first treats them as simply “alternative and more accurate stories”, as though the problem with dominant narratives were a matter of factual inaccuracy that could be corrected by substituting a more accurate account. This misses the deeper point: dominant narratives are not merely false, they organize the conditions under which any account can count as credible, evidential or intelligible in the first place. Counter-narratives do not simply offer different facts within the same framework of intelligibility, they contest the framework itself, and this is a far more demanding and dangerous undertaking. The second inadequate conceptualization treats counter-narratives as purely expressive acts,

as testimony in the ordinary sense, the voicing of a hitherto unheard perspective. This, too, misses what is philosophically most important. Counter-narratives are not only expressive; they are *constitutive*. They bring into being, partially, provisionally, under conditions of constant pressure, the shared world of meaning in which oppressed subjects can recognize one another as co-knowers and begin to act together. It is in this constitutive sense that Medina speaks of "the communicative life of resistance" as an irreducibly collective and creative epistemic practice²¹⁸.

The philosophical grounding for this analysis begins with Foucault's account of counter-history and counter-memory, developed in his lectures and writing of the early 1970s, and with the systematic reconstruction of Medina that extends that account, in his 2011 article in *Foucault Studies*²¹⁹. For Foucault, official history serves a unifying function: it produces the narrative of a society as a continuous, coherent, and purposeful whole, in which the present appears as a natural and legitimate outcome of the shared past. This unifying function is inherently political, because it conceals conflicts, exclusions, and violences through which the present order was constituted and through which it is maintained. Counter-history performs the inverse operation: it disrupts the continuity of official narratives by bringing to the surface the oppositions and divisions that official history suppresses, insisting on the discontinuity, contingency, and contestedness of what dominant accounts present as natural and inevitable.

Medina develops this Foucaultian insight into the notion of counter-memory: the socially organised practice of remembering and transmitting experiences, identities, and knowledge that have been

²¹⁸ Medina, 2023, pg 1-30.

²¹⁹ Medina Josè, *Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction and Guerrilla Pluralism*, *Foucaultian Studies* vol 12, 2011, pg 9-35.

marginalized, suppressed, or erased by dominant epistemic regimes. Counter-memory is not simply the individual act of remembering; it is a collective practice that requires a social infrastructure, however improvised and fragile, to sustain itself over time²²⁰. It is also, crucially, an act of resistance in the Foucauldian sense: an instance of what he calls the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges', the surfacing within and against dominant frameworks, of forms of knowledge that have been disqualified, dismissed, or rendered epistemically invisible²²¹. What makes counter-memory politically significant is not merely that it recovers what has been forgotten; it is that it contests the authority of the dominant record and exposes its selectivity as a political operation rather than an epistemic achievement.

This Foucaultian frame opens directly onto the politics of narration in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead's power depends not only on controlling what happens in the present but on controlling what can be remembered, transmitted, and known about the past. The regime does not merely prohibit certain acts, it reorganises the temporal horizon within which any act can be understood. Pre-Gilead history is not simply forbidden, it is rendered structurally inaccessible through the destruction of archives, the prohibition of literacy, the replacement of personal names with functional designations, and the systematic erasure of individual biography. The Handmaids are not simply prevented from speaking about the past; they are deprived of the social infrastructure, the shared memory, the common vocabulary, the institutional record, that would make the past communicatively available. This is temporal erasure operating at a collective level: not the forgetting of individual memories but the dismantling of the

²²⁰ Medina, 2011, pg 14-21.

²²¹ Foucault Michel, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1975, trans. David Macey, Picador 2003, pg 7-9. See also Foucault *The History of Sexuality*, 1976 pg 95-96.

conditions under which a shared past could persist as a resource for resistance.

OfFred's narration is, among other things, a sustained counter-memorial act. Her insistence on remembering names — her daughter's, her husband's, her mother's, her own — is not mere sentiment; it is the maintenance of a counter-archive against the regime's systematic depersonalization²²². Names, in Gilead, are precisely what the regime has stripped away, because names anchor identity in a biographical continuity that the regime's functional designations are designed to dissolve. To remember a name is to refuse the dissolution; it is to insist that a person exists as having more than the role she has been assigned because he or she has a history that precedes the assignment and cannot be fully contained by it. Each act of naming is a micro-installation of counter-memory: small, precarious, entirely invisible to the regime, but real as a practice of epistemic preservation.

Counter-narrative requires imagination, not in the trivial sense of invention, but in the rigorous sense developed by Medina in his account of resistant imagination and by Hartman in her practice of critical fabulation²²³. Both thinkers share the insight that imagination, under conditions of oppression, is not an escape from reality but a mode of engaging with it, a practice of making visible what domination has rendered invisible, of articulating what structural violence has rendered unspeakable, of populating the archive's silences with figures whose absence from the record is itself an effect of power.

²²² Atwood, 1996, pg 84 and 239. For an extended reading of OfFred's act of naming as epistemic resistance see J. Brooks Bouson, *The Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, pg 139-155.

²²³ Harman, 2008

Medina's account of resistant imagination is developed most fully in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, where it is linked to what he calls "kaleidoscopic consciousness": a multiperspectival mode of perception and understanding that refuses to settle into any single dominant viewpoint and instead cultivates the capacity to see reality from multiple, often incompatible, positions simultaneously²²⁴. Resistant imagination, in Medina's sense, is the active exercise of this multiperspectival capacity, the deliberate effort to inhabit perspectives other than those sanctioned by dominant frameworks, to populate one's understanding of social reality with voices and experiences that the dominant order works to suppress. This is not a purely individual cognitive exercise; it is, like counter-memory, a collective practice that requires social infrastructure and that generates epistemic resources like new ways of seeing, new interpretive tools, new possibilities for understanding, which can be shared and built upon.

The concept of critical fabulation, introduced in a paper in 2008 by Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, approaches the same problem from the perspective of the historical method²²⁵. Hartman's concern is the archive of slavery: a body of documentation so deeply shaped by the violence it records that it systematically renders invisible the very individuals whose lives it ostensibly documents. Enslaved women appear in plantation records as separate entries, in legal documents as property, in administrative accounts as the passive objects of transactions. Their interiority, their resistance, their family ties, all of this is absent from the archive, not incidentally but structurally, because the archive was created to serve the purposes of power and not to preserve the humanity of the enslaved. Critical fabulation is Hartman's response to this archival violence: a practice of writing that works with and against the archive, using the scraps of documentation that

²²⁴ Medina, 2013, pg 197-231

²²⁵ Hartman Saidiya, *Venus in Two Acts*, Small axe vol 12, n.2, 2008, pg 1-14.

survive to construct speculative narratives, written in what she calls “the subjunctive mood”, which imagine what the archive cannot tell us without falsely claiming to know what cannot be known²²⁶.

Atwood’s novel highlights the importance of critical fabulation in the exercise of resistance.. . The narration made by OfFred herself is a form of critical fabulation: it works with and against the limits of what can be said in Gilead, using the fragmentary, self-correcting, deliberately hesitant mode of narration that is the only honest response to her epistemic situation. She writes under conditions of radical uncertainty: she cannot verify her memories, she does not know whether anyone will ever read her words, and she cannot be sure that the conceptual resources she carries from the pre-Gilead world are still adequate to what she is living. Her account is provisional because her world has been shattered. But this very provisionality is what makes her narration a form of resistance. What she can do is insist on the practice of narration itself, on the refusal to accept that experience cannot be articulated, on the maintenance of the effort to tell perhaps an impossible story with the honest acknowledgement of its virtual impossibility. This is critical fabulation as resistance: not the triumphant recovery of silenced truth but the committed, vulnerable and necessarily incomplete practice of working against the archive that would erase it.

The concept of epistemic friction, developed by Medina across several works – beginning with his 2011 *Foucault Studies* paper and elaborated systematically in the later works of 2013 and 2023 – is the key to understanding why counter-narratives have epistemic, and not just merely expressive, significance²²⁷. “Epistemic friction” refers to the

²²⁶ Hartman, 2008, pg 11. Hartman describes critical fabulation as writing that is based on archival research while operating through the capacities of the subjunctive to tell an impossible story and amplify the impossibility of its telling.

²²⁷ Medina, 2011, pg 22-30; Medina, 2013, pg 50-89; Medina, 2023, pg 1-30.

productive conflict that arises when multiple, incompatible perspectives on social reality are brought into contact with each other. It is not the comfortable exchange of information between parties who share basic assumptions; it is the more demanding and unsettling encounter between perspectives that are structured by different social positions, different experiences of power and different ways of understanding what counts as evidence, testimony or knowledge.

Friction is productive precisely because it is uncomfortable. When counter-narratives enter into contact with dominant frameworks, they do not simply add new information to an existing body of knowledge; they disrupt the habits of attention, the credibility hierarchies, and the interpretive default assumptions through which the dominant framework organizes what can be known. They create perplexity – what Medina calls “a moment of epistemic destabilization”– in which what previously seemed natural and inevitable begins to appear contingent and contestable. This perplexity is not a failure of understanding; it is the condition of possibility for a deeper and more adequate understanding. It is the point at which the dominant framework becomes visible as a framework, rather than as reality itself²²⁸. In his analysis in 2023, Medina extends this concept to the communicative dimensions of the resistance movements, arguing that protest is not merely expressive but constitutively epistemic: it reorganizes the public space in which meaning can happen, creates new conditions for uptake and recognition, and generates what he calls communicative solidarity, the affirmative response of witnesses who echo and amplify the claims of those who have been silenced²²⁹.

²²⁸ Medina, 2013, pg 57-63. On the relationship between perplexity and epistemic progress, see also Medina's discussion on the regulative principles of epistemic friction at page 64-89.

²²⁹ Medina, 2023, pg 89-130. On communicative solidarity and the duty to echo marginalized protest, see especially 130-165 *ivi*.

This communicative dimension is crucial: counter-narratives do not function through the force of their content alone; they function through the friction they generate, the networks of recognition they activate and the new epistemic possibilities they open up for those who encounter them.

The instantiation of this framework in *Gilead* illuminates what is philosophically at stake in the transmission of counter-narratives through the whisper networks that the novel traces. When Moira's escape circulates among Handmaids as a story, its epistemic function is not exhausted by the information it conveys. The story generates friction against the regime's categorical claim that escape is impossible; it creates perplexity in subjects who have been trained to accept the regime's categories as defining the limits of the possible; and it begins, however tentatively, to build the communicative infrastructure through which a shared understanding – different from the one the regime has imposed – can take form. Each telling of the story is an act of epistemic friction: it brings into contact in the listener's mind the regime's account of what a Handmaid can do and an alternative account grounded in evidence that the regime would prefer to suppress.

Any adequate analysis of counter-narrative must acknowledge that dominant frameworks do not remain passive in the face of resistance. The regime is not simply an inert structure that counter-narratives work against, it is a dynamic system that actively works to suppress, distort and neutralize the counter-narratives that threaten its hegemony. Edgoose's (2024) concept of hermeneutical sabotage captures this active, responsive dimension of epistemic oppression with a precision that earlier frameworks lacked²³⁰. Hermeneutical sabotage, as Edgoose defines it, occurs when

²³⁰ Edgoose Han, *Hermeneutical Sabotage*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol 102 n. 4, 2024, pg 879-895.

dominantly situated knowers actively maintain hermeneutical resources that distort or misinterpret the experiences and identities of marginalized groups or when they worsen the hermeneutical resources available for understanding correctly the experiences and identities of marginalized groups. Hermeneutical sabotage is distinguished from the more passive forms of hermeneutical injustice that Fricker's original account describes because of its deliberateness. Hermeneutical sabotage is not the mere failure to develop adequate interpretive resources but the active distortion or destruction of the resources that marginalized groups have developed for themselves. It operates, Edgoose argues, through at least four mechanisms: the direct suppression of resistant hermeneutical resources; the deliberate introduction of distorting concepts that crowd out accurate ones; the misappropriation of marginal groups reassigned by dominant institutions in ways that neutralise their critical force, and the strategic amplification of distorted framings that makes resistant perspectives appear irrational or implausible²³¹.

In Gilead all four mechanisms are exemplified. The direct suppression of literacy eliminates the most basic infrastructure for the development and transmission of alternative interpretive resources. The theological vocabulary introduces a saturating framework of distorting concepts that crowd out the more accurate vocabulary of rape, murder, judicial killing, and compulsory greeting. Moira's reclassification as a Jezebel does not exemplify the misappropriation of marginal concepts. It is, rather, a case of conceptual reassignment: the regime imposes its own category onto her, overriding her resistant self-understanding and repositioning her within a classificatory scheme designed to neutralise dissent. The choreographed performance of Handmaid 'happiness' for Japanese tourists does not

²³¹ Edgoose, 2024, pg 882-890.

neatly exemplify the third mechanism, since the tourists are not confronted with resistant perspectives that the regime seeks to discredit. What the scene does show is the regime's capacity to stage misleading appearances for external audiences. At a minimum, the novel illustrates three of the mechanisms I have identified, even if not all appear in their fully developed form. These are not accidental features of Gilead's operation; they are the systematic practices through which the regime responds to the threat of counter-narrative by sabotaging the hermeneutical conditions under which counter-narrative could take root.

The analysis of willful hermeneutical ignorance developed by Pohlhaus complements Edgoose's account by identifying an epistemic disposition that hermeneutical sabotage both requires and supports²³²: willful hermeneutical ignorance. As Pohlhaus describes it, this is not a passive absence of knowledge but an active refusal: the refusal of dominantly situated knowers to acknowledge or engage with the epistemic resources developed by those who are marginally situated. It is the disposition that allows Wives to know, in some sense, that Handmaids suffer, while systematically declining to develop the interpretive resources that would make that suffering fully intelligible as suffering, as a claim with moral weight and epistemic authority. This willful ignorance is not the same as a simple deception; it is a socially maintained, institutionally supported, and often self-reinforcing disposition that operates below the level of conscious choice, shaping or re-shaping what Commanders and Wives are able to notice, what they are able to take seriously, and what they are able to hold as evidence. Counter-narratives must fight not only with active

²³² Pohlhaus Gaile Jr, *Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance*, *Hypatia* vol 27 n.4, 2012, pg 715-735.

suppression but also with this widespread willfulness that prevents the friction they generate from fully taking roots.

The central vehicle of counter-narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* is neither the written word nor the formal declaration but the whisper: the oral transmission of stories, names, and information through informal, improvised, and deliberately obscure channels. The whisper network is, in the terms of this analysis, the counter-institutional infrastructure through which Gilead's epistemic subjects maintain the conditions of their own intelligibility to one another.

Its fragility is obvious and should not be minimized. Oral transmission is susceptible to distortion, interruption, and suppression in ways that written records are not. The Handmaids cannot verify what they hear, cannot distinguish reliable testimony from rumor, cannot build the kind of cumulative evidentiary record that would give their counter-knowledge the institutional authority that the regime's account enjoys by default. They operate, in Hartman's terms, in the subjunctive: in the grammatical mood of doubt, wish, and possibility, rather than in the declarative mood of settled fact. This is an epistemic limitation that it would be dishonest to romanticize. And although Gilead is fictional, the mechanisms it dramatizes are not. Many marginalized groups in contemporary societies also rely on fragile, informal, and easily disrupted channels of knowledge-sharing when institutional infrastructures are inaccessible or hostile to them. The precarity of counter-knowledge in the novel mirrors the precarity of counter-knowledge in the real world: the difficulty of verifying testimony, the vulnerability of oral networks, the absence of institutional recognition, and the constant risk that resistant interpretations will be dismissed as rumor, exaggeration, or paranoia. Gilead magnifies these dynamics, but it does not invent them.

But fragility is not the same as ineffectiveness, and the whisper network's epistemic achievements are real despite its limitations. What it accomplishes is the creation of what Warner calls a "counter-public", a sphere of communication and recognition that operates in the margins of the dominant public sphere, sustaining the possibility of a shared perspective from which the dominant order can be assessed and found wanting²³³. The whisper network does not provide Handmaids with certainty; it provides them with something more fundamental and more politically significant like the knowledge that they are not alone, that their experience is shared, that the regime's account of their situation is not the only available account. This knowledge, however fragmentary and uncertain, is the epistemic foundation on which any collective resistance has to be built.

Moir's story is the most powerful single instance of what the whisper network can achieve. As analyzed in Section 3.3, its transmission among Handmaids introduces into the shared epistemic environment a counter-narrative that directly contests the regime's categorical claim that Handmaid existence is total and inescapable. But its significance goes beyond this single conceptual contribution. The fact that the story circulates, that it survives suppression, that it finds hearers, that it generates the kind of recognition that keeps it alive, is itself evidence of the whisper network's epistemic productivity. The story is not merely content; it is proof of concept. It demonstrates that counter-narratives can survive in Gilead, that the regime's hermeneutical sabotage is not complete, and that the conditions for a shared counter-world of meaning, however fragile and provisional, have not been entirely destroyed.

²³³ Warner Michael, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, 2002, pg 55-90. Warner's concept of the counter-public as a space of discourse oriented against a dominant public sphere applies, with appropriate modifications, to the informal networks of communication that Handmaids maintain in conditions of total epistemic control.

The phrase "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," inscribed by a previous Handmaid in the closet of OfFred's room, performs a parallel function at a more intimate scale²³⁴. As a piece of counter-narrative, it is minimal: a fragment, deliberately obscured, with no named author and no explicit content beyond its defiant posture. But as an epistemic act, it is consequential. It creates a connection across time between two subjects who share an oppressive situation without any other means of communication. It constitutes what might be called a counter-archive of one: a single document whose existence proves that the desire to resist was real, that it was not entirely suppressible, and that it left a trace that could be found and recognized by another resistor. For OfFred, the discovery of the inscription is not merely an emotional experience; it is an epistemic event, a moment of recognition that her situation is not without precedent, that another subject occupied the same space and refused to accept the regime's account of what that space means.

The novel's academic epilogue performs a final and philosophical complex act of counter-narrative reclamation that demands careful analysis, because it is neither the triumphant vindication of OfFred's testimony nor its simple co-optation, but something more troubling and more instructive than either.

At one level, the *Historical Notes* represent the success of counter-narrative. OfFred's tapes have survived; they have been found, they have been recognized as historically significant and they have been edited and presented by scholars working in a post-Gileadean society in which the regime's own claims to authority have presumably been discredited. The institutional framework within which this recognition occurs, academic history, the apparatus of conference and publication, the protocols of scholarly authentication, is precisely the

²³⁴ Atwood, 1996, pg 62.

kind of apparatus that Gilead worked so hard to destroy, and its restoration is evidence that the regime's epistemic closure was not permanent. Counter-narratives can outlive the conditions of their suppression; the archive can be partially reconstructed even after systematic destruction.

But the Historical Notes also demonstrate, with unsettling precision, the epistemic dangers that attend the institutionalization of counter-narrative. Professor Pieixoto's framing of Offred's testimony, his concern with authentication, his measured agnosticism about its accuracy, and his comparative interest in identifying the Commander, subjects her account to the evaluative criteria of a discipline that, while not continuous with Gilead's practices of deception, nevertheless reproduces certain hierarchical structures of epistemic authority. His approach privileges official documentation over lived experience and treats Offred's narrative as an object of analysis rather than as a political voice, thereby echoing at a distance the same patterns of marginalisation that shaped the regime she resisted. His rhetorical question "What would we have done?" enacts precisely the form of willful hermeneutical ignorance that Pohlhaus identifies. Rather than engaging the interpretive resources that Offred's testimony provides for understanding the regime's violence, Pieixoto recenters the perspective of the perpetrators, suspend the moral judgment, and treats their actions as potentially understandable or even relatable. In doing so, he refuses the resistant hermeneutical framework that Offred develops and reasserts the epistemic authority of dominantly situated knower²³⁵. The criteria of academic historiography like objectivity, evidentiary rigor, the suspension of moral judgment in

²³⁵ Atwood, 1996, 311–324. For a sustained critical reading of Professor Pieixoto's framing and its epistemic politics, see Madonna Miner, *Trust Me! Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, *Twentieth Century Literature** 37, no. 2, 1991, pg 148–168; and, more recently, Zoë Cunliffe, *Narrative Fiction and Epistemic Injustice*, *Ergo* vol 10, no. 6, 2023.

favor of contextual understanding, are not themselves neutral; they carry epistemic commitments that may be inadequate to the specific kind of knowledge that resistant testimony generates. The point is not to reject these criteria, but to remain vigilant about the ways in which they can, when applied uncritically, reproduce hierarchies of epistemic authority and obscure the political stakes of the testimony. Without such vigilance, the evaluation of resistant narratives risks becoming a clash of institutional power rather than a genuine engagement with the knowledge they offer.

This ambivalence is not a failure of Atwood's novel; it is one of its most important epistemic insights. The institutionalization of counter-narrative is not inherently corrosive. It can confer on resistant knowledge the social authority and durability that informal circulation lacks. But institutionalization is also never epistemically innocent: it subjects resistant knowledge to evaluative criteria that may not have been designed with such testimony in mind. The point is not to reject these criteria such as historiographical rigor, objectivity, contextual analysis, but to remain vigilant about the ways in which they can, if applied unreflectively, domesticate the very insights they aim to preserve. As the work of Fricker, Medina, Pohlhaus, and Edgoose demonstrates, these same academic norms can also be mobilized to expose epistemic injustice rather than reproduce it. There is no solution to this tension that simply resolves it; there is only the continuing practice of resistance, which must attend both to the fragility of counter-narratives that lack institutional support and to the domestication of counter-narratives that have been institutionally recognized. Medina's concept of "epistemic activism" captures what this continuing practice requires: the ongoing cultivation of the social, communicative, and imaginative capacities that allow marginalized subjects to maintain, in the face of both suppression and co-optation,

the epistemic conditions under which their experience can remain intelligible to themselves and to others²³⁶.

The final point to be made about counter-narratives, imagination, and friction is one that resists the temptation to assign this analysis a reassuring conclusion. Epistemic friction is productive, but it is not progressive in any simple sense. It does not guarantee that counter-narratives will ultimately displace dominant ones, or that the hermeneutical resources developed by marginalized subjects will eventually achieve the social authority they deserve, or that the arc of epistemic history bends toward justice. What it guarantees is something more modest and, in its modesty, more honest: that the encounter between dominant and counter-narrative generates possibilities for understanding that would not otherwise exist, that these possibilities are real even when they are not realized, and that the practice of maintaining them is not futile even when it appears not to succeed.

Medina's concept of "guerrilla pluralism" is useful here precisely because it refuses the consolations of teleology²³⁷. Guerrilla pluralism is not a pluralism that aims at harmonious consensus, at the integration of all perspectives into a single enlarged understanding, or at the progressive overcoming of epistemic injustice through the accumulation of better knowledge. It is a pluralism that focuses on gaps, discontinuities, tensions, and clashes that aims not at melioration but at resistance, not at the overcoming of struggle but at its re-energization. Counter-narratives, on this view, are not proto-truths awaiting institutional recognition; they are acts of epistemic insurgency that matter because they contest the authority

²³⁶ Medina, 2023, pg 220-265. On epistemic activism as a practice of cultivating communicative and imaginative capacities under conditions of oppression, see also Medina, *Aesthetic Resistance: Reimagining Critical Epistemology and the Grammars of Silence*, Social Epistemology vol 39 n. 4, 2025, pg 347-357.

²³⁷ Medina, 2011, pg 24-31.

of dominant frameworks, disrupt the complacency of willful ignorance, and keep alive the possibility of a different distribution of epistemic power without any guarantee that this possibility will be actualized.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this irreducibly contingent character of counter-narrative is inscribed in the narrative form itself. Of Fred's account may or may not have survived; the *Historical Notes* tell us that it did, but they also remind us that this outcome was not inevitable, that the tapes might easily have been lost, and that the reconstruction they make possible is incomplete and contested. The novel refuses to resolve the tension between the necessity of counter-narrative and its fragility, between the epistemic importance of resistant imagination and its dependence on conditions that domination works to destroy. This refusal is not pessimism; it is philosophical honesty. Counter-narratives, imagination, and friction are the practices through which oppressed subjects claim the right to participate in the epistemic governance of the social world, not as a guarantee of justice, but as the irreplaceable condition of its possibility.

3.5 The Courage to Know Differently

The three preceding modalities of resistance, attentional disruption, conceptual agency and counter-narrative, all presuppose something that has not yet been named explicitly: a disposition. They describe what resistance does, but they do not yet account for what enables it, what sustains it in the face of suppression, and what makes it possible to maintain an alternative relationship with knowledge under conditions systematically designed to prevent any alternative relationship with knowledge. This disposition is *epistemic courage*: the

capacity to persist in knowing differently when the social, institutional, and affective costs of doing so are real, specific, and sometimes severe.

The concept demands careful philosophical construction. Epistemic courage is not simply intellectual bravery, the willingness to hold unpopular opinions or to challenge received wisdom in conditions of relative safety. It is something both more particular and more demanding: the capacity to maintain, transmit, and act upon knowledge that a dominant order has declared illegitimate, invisible, or nonexistent, under conditions in which doing so carries risks that are not evenly distributed across a social hierarchy. It is, in the precise sense to be developed in this section, a virtue, but a virtue whose conditions of exercise are constitutively shaped by relations of power that the standard virtue-epistemological literature has not always adequately theorized. To understand epistemic courage in conditions of oppression requires bringing together resources from three distinct but convergent bodies of thought: Foucault's late analysis of parrhesia, Medina's account of meta-lucidity and the asymmetric distribution of epistemic burdens, and a critical engagement with the virtue-epistemological tradition that identifies both its contributions and its limits.

Foucault's analysis of parrhesia, developed in his final seminars at Berkeley in 1983 and at the Collège de France in 1983–84, offers the most philosophically rigorous account available of what it means to speak truth at risk to oneself²³⁸. Parrhesia, from the ancient Greek, meaning roughly "saying everything" or "frank speech", designates a particular relationship between speaker, truth, and danger: the parrhesiastes is one who says what she believes to be true, says it plainly and without rhetorical embellishment, and says it in a situation in which saying it carries a personal cost. "If there is a kind of 'proof' of

²³⁸ Foucault Michel, *Fearless Speech*, Pearson, 2001.

the sincerity of the parrhesiastes," Foucault writes, "it is his courage. The fact that a speaker says something dangerous, different from what the majority believes, is a strong indication that he is a parrhesiastes"²³⁹.

Several features of this analysis are philosophically decisive for clarifying the notion of epistemic courage. The first is the relationship between truth and risk. Parrhesia is not simply the assertion of a difficult truth; it is the assertion of a truth in a context in which the assertion carries personal danger. This relational character distinguishes it from mere frank opinion, which may be unpopular without being dangerous, and from professional truth-telling, which is institutionally protected and therefore does not involve the same kind of personal exposure. For Foucault, the willingness to accept the risk is itself the ethical substance of the act: what makes parrhesiastic speech an ethical achievement, rather than merely a cognitive one, is the speaker's choice to place herself in a position of vulnerability for the sake of the truth she holds. The second decisive feature is what Foucault calls the "asymmetry of power" that defines the parrhesiastic situation²⁴⁰. The parrhesiastes is always in a position of relative inferiority with respect to the interlocutor: she speaks truth to power, which means she speaks truth to someone who has the capacity to punish her for speaking it. This asymmetry is not incidental; it is constitutive of the act's ethical character. A king or tyrant cannot be a parrhesiastes, because he risks nothing; only those who occupy positions of relative weakness can perform the act in its full ethical sense. Applied to conditions of epistemic oppression, this insight is clarifying: the epistemic courage required to know differently under

²³⁹ Ivi, pg 15

²⁴⁰ Ivi, pg 17-19. See also Daniele Lorenzini, *Reasons versus Power: Genealogy, Critique and Epistemic Injustice*, *The Monist* vol. 105 n.4, 2022, pg 541-557. At 549-551, for a careful reconstruction of the political dimension of Foucault's parrhesia in relation to contemporary debates about epistemic injustice.

conditions of domination is not the same as the intellectual courage required to challenge received wisdom in open academic debate. It is a more demanding virtue, shaped by the specific vulnerabilities of those who bear it.

The third feature is the relationship between parrhesia and self-constitution. In his *Courage of Truth* lectures, Foucault argues that parrhesiastic speech is not only an act directed outward, toward an interlocutor and a social world; it is also an act directed inward, toward the speaker's own relationship with herself²⁴¹. To speak truth at risk is to constitute oneself as a subject who prefers truth to safety, who chooses "herself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is far from danger," in Foucault's formulation. This self-constitutive dimension is directly relevant to the situation of Handmaids in Gilead. Strictly speaking, Offred's refusal to adopt the regime's vocabulary is not parrhesia in the classical Foucauldian sense, since parrhesia requires a public interlocutor, an asymmetry of power, and a concrete risk incurred in speaking truth to someone who can punish the speaker. What Offred performs is a more preliminary but no less significant form of veridiction: an inward practice of truthfulness through which she refuses to let the regime's categories settle as final. In naming the Ceremony as rape — however hesitantly and self-correctingly — she constitutes herself as a subject capable of maintaining a truth that the regime declares nonexistent. This is not yet parrhesia, but it is the subjective labour that makes parrhesia possible: the preservation of an inner space of truth against a totalising apparatus of falsehood. Daniele Lorenzini's recent reconstruction of Foucault's project in *The Force of Truth* provides a crucial supplement to the analysis. Lorenzini argues that Foucault's concern throughout his career was not with truth itself (e.g. with a correspondence relation

²⁴¹ Foucault Michel, *The Courage of Truth*, Feltrinelli, 1984, pg 8-15.

between propositions and states of affairs), but with the problem of – to use Lorenzini's words – "the force of truth": the question of how certain truth-claims acquire the power to govern conduct while others are suppressed, dismissed, or rendered epistemically inert²⁴². This reframing connects Foucault's late work on parrhesia directly to his earlier work on regimes of truth and power/knowledge: parrhesia is the individual ethical response to the collective epistemic and political problem of how to respond to oppressive regimes of truth. Parrhesia is in fact the act through which a subject refuses to let the regime's administration of truth-force go uncontested. Lorenzini further suggests, in his 2022 *Monist* article, that this Foucaultian framework is directly relevant to contemporary debates about epistemic injustice: the capacity of dominant epistemic frameworks to silence, discredit, or suppress marginal knowledge is not merely an epistemic failure but a form of power exercise. Therefore, contesting it requires not only better arguments but the ethical disposition to speak at risk²⁴³.

Foucault's analysis of parrhesia illuminates the ethical structure of epistemic courage, but it does not adequately theorize the social distribution of the burden it places on those who exercise it. For this, Medina's notion of *meta-lucidity* — explicitly developed as an extension of Du Bois's *double consciousness* — is crucial: it names the heightened reflexive awareness through which oppressed subjects monitor and compare the dominant and the resistant interpretive frameworks that structure their experience²⁴⁴. For Du Bois, the African American subject is compelled to live with a double consciousness, the experience of oneself simultaneously through one's own eyes and through the eyes of a hostile white community, which is both physically burdensome and epistemically significant. It is burdensome

²⁴² Lorenzini Daniele, *The Force of Truth: Critique, Genealogy and Truth-Telling in Michel Foucault*, Chicago University Press, 2023, pg 1-25.

²⁴³ Lorenzini, 2022, 541-557.

²⁴⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, A. C. McClurg, 1903, pg 3-4.

because it requires the permanent maintenance of two incompatible self images; it is epistemically significant because it produces, in those who can sustain it, a form of perception more adequate to the complexity of social reality than the single perspective complacency available to those in dominant positions. Patricia Hill Collins develops this insight specifically in relation to Black women's epistemology, arguing that the bifurcated consciousness produced by the intersection of racism and sexism generates, for those who bear it, self representational resources that are unavailable to those who inhabit only the dominant perspective²⁴⁵.

Medina extends and radicalizes this analysis through the concept of meta lucidity: not merely the capacity to see from two perspectives simultaneously, but the more complex capacity to see that one is doing so – more exactly, the capacity to be reflectively aware of the multiplicity of one's own epistemic perspectives and of the social conditions that have produced them²⁴⁶. What is decisive for the present argument, however, is a point that Medina makes with great care and that must not be lost in enthusiasm for the epistemic achievements of marginal consciousness: the capacity for double consciousness, meta lucidity and kaleidoscopic perception is not a gift but a burden asymmetrically imposed. Oppressed subjects are compelled to develop these capacities not by free choice but by the necessities of survival in a hostile epistemic environment. They must learn to see the world from the dominant perspective in order to navigate it safely. But they must also maintain their own counter-perspective in order to preserve their sense of self and their grip on their own experience. And they must do both simultaneously,

²⁴⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, 2000, pg 97-100. Medina's reconstruction of Collins' account in relation to Du Bois appears in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 156-163.

²⁴⁶ Medina, 2023, pg 221-231.

without the luxury of the single-perspective security that dominant subjects enjoy. This epistemic labor is a real, demanding and exhausting cognitive and affective work, which is unevenly distributed along the lines of social hierarchy²⁴⁷.

Hawkins and Davis have recently pressed on the limits of this analysis, arguing that conceptual expansions of Du Boisian double consciousness, including Medina's kaleidoscopic consciousness, risk obscuring the structural barriers that make such capacities genuinely difficult to achieve and maintain, particularly for those most severely marginalized²⁴⁸. Their critique is philosophically important: it reminds us that epistemic courage cannot be demanded of the oppressed as though it were simply available, a reservoir of virtue waiting to be activated. Under conditions of extreme oppression, the maintenance of meta-lucidity carries costs that may be prohibitive, like psychic costs, social costs and material costs that the standard virtue-epistemological literature, oriented toward relatively safe academic contexts, has not always taken seriously.

This critical point connects directly with Dotson's account of testimonial smothering, analyzed in Chapter 1. Testimonial smothering – the rational self-silencing of subjects who anticipate that their testimony will be misunderstood, distorted, or used against them – is not a failure of epistemic courage²⁴⁹. It is a rational and self-protective response to a genuinely dangerous epistemic environment. To demand epistemic courage of subjects in such environments without acknowledging the structural conditions that make courage costly is to blame the oppressed for a condition that oppression has produced. Epistemic courage, properly understood, is not a virtue that can be

²⁴⁷ Medina, 2023, pg 155-156 and 195-196. On the concept of epistemic labor and its asymmetric distribution, see also Kristie Dotson, *Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression*, 115-138.

²⁴⁸ Orlando Hawkins and Emmalon Davis, *The Future of Double Consciousness: Epistemic Virtue, Identity, and Structural Anti-Blackness*, Ergo vol 11 n.5, 2024.

²⁴⁹ Dotson, 2011, pg 244-248.

distributed as a moral requirement across all epistemic subjects regardless of their social position; it is a virtue whose exercise is conditioned by the specific vulnerabilities and resources of those who are asked to practice it.

The virtue of epistemological tradition offers resources for theorizing epistemic courage that complement the Foucaultian and social-epistemological accounts, though these resources require critical appropriation. Zagzebski's influential account of the intellectual virtues treats them as a subset of moral virtues, rooted in the agent's motivational orientation toward truth and understanding²⁵⁰. On this view, epistemic courage as the disposition to pursue and maintain truth in the face of obstacles, social pressure, or personal risk, is formally analogous to moral courage: it involves a stable motivational orientation, a characteristic emotional responsiveness to the situations in which it is called for, and a propensity to act in ways that are well-calibrated to the relevant risks and goods. Baehr develops a more specific account, arguing that intellectual courage is best understood as the disposition to respond well to threats to one's epistemic well-being, with particular emphasis on the courage to inquire or to pursue difficult questions even when the answers are uncomfortable, and on the courage to maintain and transmit what one knows in the face of social pressure to conform or be silent²⁵¹.

The crucial limitation of these accounts, from the perspective of this analysis, is that they are formulated in abstraction from the social

²⁵⁰ Zagzebski Linda Trinkaus, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pg 137-166

²⁵¹ Baehr Jason, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2011, chapter 9. See also Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pg 148-172, for a Nietzschean account of intellectual courage as the courage to inquire into the forbidden.

conditions that structure both the costs of epistemic courage and the resources available for its exercise. In standard virtue or epistemological contexts, the *threats* to epistemic well-being are primarily psychological, such as the discomfort of confronting one's own errors, the social awkwardness of challenging received opinion, and the intellectual difficulty of pursuing hard questions. In conditions of oppression, the threats are of a different order: social sanction, material harm, physical danger, and the systematic disqualification of one's testimony before it has even been uttered. A virtue theory adequate to these conditions must theorize epistemic courage not merely as a cognitive and motivational disposition but as a practice shaped by, and responsive to, the specific power relations within which it is exercised.

Fricker's concept of the epistemic virtues required for active engagement with testimonial injustice moves in this direction, though it focuses primarily on the virtues of hearers such as dispositions of critical openness, reflexive awareness of identity prejudice and hermeneutical sensitivity required for just epistemic engagement, rather than on the virtues of speakers who resist the injustices to which they are subjected²⁵². What is needed, to complete this picture, is an account of the virtues of epistemic resistance: the dispositions that enable oppressed subjects to maintain their epistemic agency, transmit their knowledge, and contest the dominant framework's authority to define what counts as knowledge in the first place. Epistemic courage, as analyzed in this section, is the primary such virtue.

Atwood's novel is, among other things, a sustained and unsentimental examination of the costs of epistemic courage under conditions of totalitarian oppression. It does not romanticize

²⁵² Fricker, 2007, pg 169-175.

resistance, it shows, with considerable psychological honesty, the ways in which the pressure to conform is not merely external coercion but an internal pull, a genuine temptation toward the psychic relief of full compliance that makes the maintenance of alternative knowledge genuinely effortful. OfFred's narrative voice enacts this tension throughout. Her constant self-corrections are not stylistic affectations, they are the textual traces of the effort required to maintain, against sustained pressure, a coherent epistemic stance that diverges from the regime's self description²⁵³. The regime does not merely prohibit dissent; it works, through ritual repetition, affective conditioning, and the saturation of the conceptual field with its own categories, to make dissent feel not only dangerous but pointless, to produce in its subjects the felt sense that there is no other way of understanding what is happening, no alternative vocabulary, no different world in which things could be otherwise. Knowing differently, under these conditions, requires the ongoing, effortful construction of a counter-reality against the grain of everything the regime makes available. This is what makes it an exercise of courage and not merely of knowledge.

The figures of the Aunts offer a precise and philosophically revealing counter-case. The Aunts are not simply complicit in the regime's violence; they are, in the specific sense being developed here, epistemic cowards: subjects who possess, or who once possessed, the cognitive resources to know differently, and who have made (or been shaped into making) the choice to deploy those resources in the service of the regime's knowledge rather than against it. Aunt Lydia, in particular, is a figure who reads as someone who knows. Her occasional flickers of self-awareness, the moments in which the novel hints at a consciousness aware of its own condition, suggest a subject

²⁵³ Atwood, 1996, pg 73

who maintains, beneath the surface of her performed certainty, something of the double consciousness that her role requires her to suppress. Her epistemic courage has been converted, through whatever combination of coercion and accommodation, into its opposite: a disposition to actively suppress in others the kind of knowing differently that she herself no longer practices²⁵⁴.

OfGlen, and behind her the Mayday network, represents the most fully realized form of epistemic courage in the novel. What distinguishes OfGlen from OfFred, at least during the period of their walks together, is not an access to different information but a different relationship with the information she holds. She has made the choice to act on her knowledge, to transmit it, to constitute herself as a subject whose epistemic commitments have behavioral and social consequences. Her participation in Mayday is not only a political act, it is an epistemic act: the decision to treat her own counter-knowledge as real and actional, rather than as a private deviation from the regime's official account. In Foucaultian terms, she has constituted herself as a parrhesiastes in the full sense, a subject who prefers to live as a truth-teller rather than to purchase safety at the cost of epistemic capitulation.

As Medina argues forcefully in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, the epistemic courage required for knowing differently cannot be understood as an individual virtue alone, but as a socially distributed capacity that emerges from shared practices of resistance and from the supportive networks that sustain dissent²⁵⁵. It is not only that individual acts of epistemic courage are more sustainable when they are supported by a collective network of recognition and mutual

²⁵⁴ On Aunt Lydia as a figure of converted epistemic courage, see the nuanced reading in Coral Ann Howells, 1996, pg 150-155. For a more recent discussion of the Aunts as collaborators in the regime's epistemic project, see Molly Hiro, *Rereading the Romance in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, *Woman Studies* vol 38, n.4, 2009, pg 389-394.

²⁵⁵ Medina, 2023, pg 135-148

reinforcement, though this is true and important. It is that the very epistemic content of knowing differently is constitutively collective, since it requires the comparison and cross-validation of perspectives that can only occur in exchange and the development of the shared interpretive resources through which alternative ways of knowing become communicable and actionable. This is what Medina calls the duty to echo: the obligation of those who witness epistemic injustice to amplify rather than merely acknowledge the resistant voices of those who are subjected to it. The duty to echo is not primarily a moral demand but an epistemic one: it is grounded in the recognition that individual acts of epistemic courage are structurally fragile in isolation and that their social efficacy depends on the responsiveness of others who are positioned to receive, validate and retransmit the knowledge they carry. Without this network of mutual recognition and amplification, epistemic courage can accomplish little more than private integrity. With it, instead, epistemic courage becomes the basis for the counter-public infrastructure of knowledge whose construction Sections 3.2-3.4 have traced.

In Gilead, this collective dimension of epistemic courage is both essential and endangered. The regime works precisely to isolate epistemic subjects from one another, to prevent the formation of the networks through which individual acts of knowing differently could accumulate into collective epistemic alternatives. The enforced solitude of Handmaids, the prohibition of unsanctioned communication, the structuring of relationships around mutual surveillance rather than mutual recognition. All of these are strategies directed at preventing the collective exercise of epistemic courage by ensuring that each act of knowing differently remains isolated and therefore fragile. That the whisper network persists despite this, that Mayday functions, that stories circulate, that names are remembered,

is evidence not only that individual epistemic courage survives but that the conditions for its collective exercise have not been entirely destroyed.

It is necessary to conclude this section with a balance that the analysis has worked to maintain throughout: between recognition of what epistemic courage achieves and honest acknowledgement of what it costs. Knowing differently, in conditions of oppression, is never free. It is always performed against a background of real risk, of credibility deficit, social sanction, physical danger and the persistent psychic strain of maintaining a counter-reality against the grain of everything the dominant order makes available. These costs are not evenly distributed: they fall most heavily on those who are already most vulnerable, whose epistemic standing is already most precarious, and who have the fewest institutional resources with which to protect themselves from the consequences of dissent. The philosophical literature on epistemic courage has not always taken sufficient account of this asymmetry, and any adequate account of the virtue must begin by acknowledging it.

At the same time, and without diminishing the reality of the costs, epistemic courage under conditions of oppression is a genuine achievement, not the triumphant achievement of narratives that romanticize resistance, but the ordinary and often invisible achievement of subjects who maintain, under sustained pressure to abandon it, a relationship with their own knowledge and to one another that domination has not fully succeeded in destroying. OfFred's narration is such an achievement. OfGlen's practiced courage is such an achievement. The whispered name, the averted gaze that sees anyway, the coded phrase that means two things at once - all of these are achievements, fragile and partial but real. What makes them philosophically significant, in the terms of this analysis, is not their

heroism but their structure. They demonstrate that the epistemic conditions for knowing differently can be maintained even within a system designed to eliminate them. They show that the parrhesiastic act — the willingness to constitute oneself as a truth-teller at risk — is possible under conditions more extreme than those theorised in the standard philosophical literature. And they reveal, finally, that the courage to know differently is not a property of exceptional individuals but a practice sustained by networks, transmitted through stories, and renewed in every small act of mutual recognition between subjects who refuse, together, to let the world of power become the only available world of meaning. What the novel magnifies, however, is a dynamic that is fully operative in real societies: the fact that epistemic courage is rarely solitary, and that resistant knowledge survives not through heroic individuals but through the fragile, everyday infrastructures of solidarity that allow people to hold on to truths that dominant institutions deny.

3.6 Conclusions

The analysis developed in Chapter 3 converges on a single claim that is both descriptive and philosophical: resistance, in conditions of epistemic oppression, is not an exception to the normal functioning of power but an effect of its very attempt to be inexorable and complete. A regime that governs through meaning, that constitutes subjects by constituting the conceptual field within which they can appear, think and act, must demand continuous performance, perpetual reiteration and compulsory witnessing from those it governs. And it is precisely in these demands that its vulnerability resides. Every reiteration is a

potential deviation. Every moment of compulsory witnessing is a potential occasion for silent solidarity. Every prescribed formula is a vessel that can be privately emptied and filled with something else. Chapter 3 has traced the forms this emptying and refilling can take, such as attentional, conceptual, narrative and ethical, and has tried to give each form a clear philosophical description.

The argument has unfolded through four distinct but internally connected modalities. Section 3.2 established the foundational claim: that epistemic resistance is not reducible to speaking back, voicing dissent, or asserting alternative truths within the dominant framework. Instead, it is more radically the collective practice through which oppressed subjects rebuild the conditions of intelligibility themselves, the shared world of meaning in which experience can become communicable, credible and actionable. Epistemic riot, in the precise sense developed there, names not an event but a practice: the ongoing construction, under conditions of siege, of a counter-public infrastructure of knowledge that is fragile, improvised and partial, but genuinely real in its effects.

Section 3.3 moved from the level of perception to the level of the concept. Conceptual agency is the capacity to inhabit the regime's categories without being fully inhabited by them, to use them, twist them, empty them of their intended meaning and fill them with counter-meaning that the regime cannot fully control without dismantling the very system of enforcement that depends on their reiteration. Butler's account of performative citation opened the theoretical space: Haslanger's ameliorative analysis provided the methodological model; Fablo's identification of hermeneutical distortion, as distinct from the mere absence of concepts, clarified what conceptual agency is working against. The Gileadean examples like OfFred's hesitations, Moira's resignification of Jezebel, Mayday's

double-coding of regime lexicon, showed what this can look like in practice, not revolution but the maintenances, under sustained pressure, of an alternative relationship with the concepts through which domination defines its subjects.

Section 3.4 extended the analysis into the temporal and narrative dimensions of resistance. Counter-narratives are not merely alternative stories; they are the medium through which resistant knowledge crosses the boundary from private injury to shared recognition, and from individual experience to collective resource. Medina's account of counter-memory and epistemic friction provided the theoretical core: friction is productive, not because it resolves tension between dominant and counter-narrative, but because it makes the dominant narrative visible as a narrative, which is contingent, selective and contestable, rather than just true. Hartman's critical fabulation added the methodological insight that working against the archive does not require pretending the archive is neutral; it requires working with the fragments it preserves toward the stories it was designed to make impossible. Edgoose's concept of hermeneutical sabotage clarified the dynamic character of the dominant response: the regime does not simply fail to provide adequate interpretive resources; it actively distorts and destroys the ones that marginal subjects develop for themselves.

Section 3.5 named the dispositional ground that makes all three of the preceding modalities possible: epistemic courage. Through Foucault's analysis of parrhesia, Medina's account of meta-lucidity and its asymmetric costs, and a critical engagement with the virtue-epistemological tradition, the section argued that knowing differently under conditions of oppression is a genuine ethical and epistemic achievement, not a heroic exception but an ordinary, persistent, and often invisible practice sustained by networks of

mutual recognition and transmitted through the same whisper channels that carry the counter-narratives of section 3.4. The courage to know differently is not a property of exceptional individuals; it is a collective practice whose exercise is conditioned by, and responsive to, the specific power relations within which it occurs.

Taken together, these four modalities constitute what might be called, with appropriate caution about the risks of systematization, an immanent theory of epistemic resistance: a theory that, in a sense, locates resistance not outside the system it opposes but within it, exploiting the dependencies and instabilities that the system generates through its own demands for compliance. This immanence is philosophically important for two reasons. First, it explains why resistance is possible even in conditions of extreme epistemic control. It is hard to think that the regime could eliminate the possibility of deviation without eliminating the very practices of reiteration and performance through which it reproduces itself. Also, it seems very plausible that it could suppress all counter-narratives without eliminating the social interactions through which its own authority is continuously confirmed. In the same way, it could not destroy all epistemic courage without dismantling the network of surveillance and enforcement that depends on at least some subjects choosing compliance voluntarily. Second, immanence clarifies why resistance is always fragile. It has no external ground, no archimedean point outside the system from which to lever the whole structure. It must work with the materials the system provides, in the spaces the system generates, under the conditions the system imposes. This is simultaneously what makes resistance possible and what limits what it can achieve.

The relationship between Chapter 3 and the preceding chapters is one of logical completion rather than mere addition. Chapter 1 diagnosed the mechanisms of epistemic harm in general: testimonial

injustice, hermeneutical injustice, cognitive erasure, illocutionary silencing. It showed how power operates through credibility, interpretation, and visibility, to produce the epistemic invisibility of marginalized subjects. Chapter 2 described the structural architecture of these mechanisms when used in a coordinated and systematic way by power. The result is the production of a regime of truth that organizes what can be known, institutions that produce and legitimate ignorance, categories that extract and appropriate subordinated knowledge, and an arbitration of knowability that determines what can enter the field of the intelligible. Chapter 3 has shown what subjects can and often do within and against this architecture: how they disrupt it at the level of attention, hollow it out at the level of the concept, contest it through the production and transmission of counter-narratives, and sustain the disposition to do all of this through the cultivation of epistemic courage. The three chapters do not account for separate phenomena; they explain, from three different angles, a single phenomenon, the relationship between power and knowledge, as it appears from the perspectives of domination, structural analysis, and resistance respectively.

What remains is a reflection on the limits of the analysis, which intellectual honesty requires. Chapter 3 has argued that resistance is possible and that it is philosophically significant, that it is not reducible to the expressions of desperate individuals but constitutes a genuine coral epistemic practice with real effects on the conditions of knowledge. This claim is defensible and important. But it should not be allowed to slide into the more comfortable and less honest claim that *this* type of resistance – which is structurally fragile – is adequate to the task of dismantling the structural machinery of domination that Chapters 1 and 2 have described. It is not. Even Atwood's novel suggests it is not. OfFred's narrative survives, but she herself may not.

Mayday operates, but Gilead endures. The whisper network functions, but the Wall is not empty. The counter-world of meaning that resistance constructs is real, but the world of power that surrounds and constrains it is also real. And what the novel magnifies is a dynamic that operates just as forcefully outside its pages: in actual societies, too, resistant communities build fragile but genuine counter-worlds of sense, while dominant institutions continue to impose the interpretive frameworks within which those counter-worlds must struggle to survive.

This is the honest conclusion that the analysis yields: epistemic resistance, in conditions of oppression, would seem to be necessary but is certainly not sufficient. It seems necessary because without it, the conditions for any future transformation appear foreclosed. This is so because a world in which the oppressed have entirely lost the capacity to know differently, to name their experience, to recognize one another as co-knowers and co-resistors, is a world from which justice has been structurally excluded. Epistemic resistance is not sufficient because the structural machinery of epistemic domination cannot be dismantled through it alone: this requires institutional transformation, political action, and the redistribution of the material conditions that make epistemic agency possible in the first place.

The philosophical value of this conclusion is not diminished by its modesty. To name what resistance achieves, and to name honestly what it cannot achieve alone, is not pessimism; it is the kind of clarity that serious engagement with both the theory and the practice of resistance demands. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood achieves this clarity through the novel's refusal of a resolution: OfFred's narrative survives, but the Historical Notes remind us that survival is not the same as justice, and that the recognition of resistant knowledge by an institution is not the same as the transformation of the conditions that

made resistance necessary. The epistemic struggles traced in this chapter are real, ongoing, and unfinished. That is precisely why they matter. Outside the novel, too, communities who are denied credibility or interpretive authority engage in forms of epistemic resistance: they create counter-archives, develop alternative vocabularies, circulate testimonies that institutions ignore, and sustain one another in the labour of knowing differently. The dynamics that Gilead magnifies are recognisable in the real world precisely because they structure the everyday efforts of marginalised groups to preserve and transmit knowledge under conditions that constrain its uptake.

Conclusions: Toward Shame

This thesis began with a question that is simultaneously philosophical and political: what does it mean to deprive a thinking being of the conditions under which they can know, speak and be heard? It ends with a claim that the analysis has gradually and unavoidably been forced into view - one that extends beyond the epistemological domain into a deeper diagnosis of the emotional and moral architecture through which societies reproduce their own injustices across generations. That claim is the following: the mechanisms of epistemic domination described across these three chapters are not only political arrangements that could in principle be dismantled by better institutions or more enlightened legislation. They are also sustained, at a level that political reform alone cannot reach, by the moral psychology of guilt - by the specific structure of self-relation, social accountability, and identity that guilt-based moral cultures produce in their subjects. And as long as this moral psychology remains unexamined and unreformed, the structural machinery of epistemic oppression, whenever it is operative, will continue to reproduce itself- This is so because it is ultimately built into the very emotions through which subjects understand themselves in relation to their failures, to one another, and to the question of who they are becoming.

This is the argument that the following sections develop. It proceeds through four main movements. First, there is a synthetic account of the thesis's analytical achievements across its three chapters. Second, it follows a detailed analysis of guilt as a moral emotion - drawing on Bernard Williams's foundational critique in *Shame and Necessity* and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* - to show why guilt is constitutively inadequate as a resource for the kind

of social, personal, and epistemic evolution that justice requires. Third, the reader can find a sustained positive account of shame, developed through Alessandra Fussi's *Per una teoria della vergogna*, as a moral-emotional structure capable of grounding the kind of growth — in knowledge, in character, in collective consciousness, and in the shared transmission of interpretive resources — that guilt systematically forecloses. Fourth, the conclusion is a reflection on the specific conditions under which the argument applies to the forms of epistemic domination analyzed in the preceding chapters, and on the risks that any argument for shame must face.

The three chapters have built a layered account of epistemic domination whose individual components illuminate one another and which, taken together, constitute a comprehensive map of the mechanisms through which power governs not only what subjects can do but what they can know, say, name and imagine. Chapter 1 established the micro-level grammar of epistemic harm. Fricker's distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice provided the initial vocabulary: the first describes the unjust deflation of a speaker's credibility on the basis of an identity prejudice; the second describes the structural absence of the conceptual resources through which certain experiences can be described and communicated. The analysis extended these foundational categories through Dotson's account of testimonial quieting and smothering - the failure to recognize marginalized subjects as knowers at all, and the rational self-silencing that results from the anticipation of misrecognition - and through the concept of cognitive erasure, which refers to the progressive overwriting of epistemic agency through the cumulative accumulation of these harms into a structural condition. Illocutionary disablement, analyzed through Austin's speech act theory and Langton's account of silencing, revealed the deepest layer: not only are

marginalized speakers not believed, and lack the conceptual resources to articulate their experience; their very speech acts fail to produce the social effects they are designed to produce, because the social conditions for their recognition as the kinds of acts they are have been systematically withdrawn.

Chapter 2 moved to the structural architecture that gives these individual harms their systemic character. Power, conceived through Foucault's decisive break with the juridical model, was shown to operate not primarily by prohibiting but by constituting: generating the categories, regimes of truth, attentional habits, and perceptual defaults through which subjects can appear as intelligible or invisible, credible or suspect, before any evaluation begins. Institutions do not merely fail to resist epistemic injustice; they actively produce and stabilize it through the management of archives, curricula, research agendas, and media environments that determine what can be known, remembered, and taken seriously. Categories were shown to function as normative scaffolding that prescribes roles and extracts knowledge from subordinated groups without granting them hermeneutical sovereignty over the meanings produced. The arbitration of knowability - the determination of what can enter the field of the intelligible at all - was identified as one of the most consequential exercises of political power available, precisely because it governs the conditions under which injustice can be named and contested rather than merely the conditions under which it is enacted.

Chapter 3 examined the forms of resistance that this architecture tends to generate and must confront. Epistemic riot, conceptual agency, counter-narrative, and epistemic courage were analyzed as four modalities of immanent resistance, practices that work not from a position external to the system but within it, exploiting the structural dependencies and performative instabilities

that the system's own demands generate. The chapter's conclusions were honest about the limits of these practices: epistemic resistance is necessary but not sufficient to stop epistemic domination; the counter-worlds of meaning that oppressed subjects construct are real but fragile; and something more is required, at a level deeper than the political or institutional, if the mechanisms of epistemic domination are to be genuinely interrupted rather than merely contested. It is at this deeper level that the analysis of guilt and shame becomes essential.

To understand why guilt is inadequate as the primary moral emotion of a society that aspires to genuine epistemic and social evolution it is necessary to understand what guilt actually is, not as a vague feeling of wrongdoing but as something provided with a specific moral and psychological structure with a determinate logic, specific objects and specific effects on the subject who experiences it. Bernard Williams, in *Shame and Necessity*, identifies guilt as the moral emotion that belongs to what he calls “the morality system”. This is, for Williams, the peculiar institution of modern ethical thought, rooted in Kantian universalism and utilitarian consequentialism alike, that has elevated the compliance with universal rules as the supreme form of moral achievement, and the violation of those rules as the paradigm of moral failure²⁵⁶. Guilt, on this understanding, is the appropriate internal response to rule-violation: the feeling that one has failed to conform to a standard that stands above and independent of one’s particular identity, social relationships and visions of the good life. It is, in William’s precise formulation “directed at what one has done, at one’s actions as an event in the world, rather than oneself as the kind of person who does such things”²⁵⁷. The distinction is crucial. It says: you

²⁵⁶ Williams Bernard, *Shame and Necessity*, 1993, University of California Press, pg 89-95. On the morality system as William’s target, see also *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 1985, Fontana Press, chapter 1 to 10.

²⁵⁷ Ivi, pg 92

have done something wrong. It does not say - cannot say, by its own internal logic - you are the kind of person who does this, and that is something you must attend to, understand, and change. This action-directedness has a structural consequence that Williams identifies with great precision: guilt can demand reparation but cannot motivate reconstruction. His formulation deserves to be quoted carefully: guilt "can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparations in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot by itself help one to understand one's relations to those happenings, or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which one has to live."²⁵⁸ The crucial phrase is 'rebuild the self': guilt can be discharged through reparation, without requiring any transformation of the self who failed. Once the debt has been paid, the guilty subject is discharged: the slate is clean, the ledger balanced, the transgression formally acknowledged and formally closed. What guilt does not require and cannot require is the transformation of the self who committed the transgression - the development, in the subject's character, of the habits of attention, evaluation, and care that would make the repetition of the failure less likely. Guilt asks: what did you do? It does not ask: who are you, and what does what you did reveal about who you are?

This logic has profound consequences for social arrangements that are organized primarily around the management of guilt. Such societies — and modern liberal democratic societies are, in Williams's diagnosis, substantially guilt societies — will tend to respond to moral and epistemic failure through institutional mechanisms designed to assign and discharge guilt: legal accountability, formal reparation, official apology, procedural sanction. These mechanisms are not

²⁵⁸ Williams, 1993, pg 92. The full passage appears in chapter 4, the pivotal chapter for the present argument

worthless. They provide important forms of recognition and redress for specific wrongs. But they are constitutively inadequate as responses to structural injustice, because structural injustice is not primarily the product of specific culpable acts but of the accumulated habits, dispositions, credibility hierarchies, and interpretive defaults that guilt-management systems leave entirely untouched. An institution that manages its epistemic failures through formal accountability that assigns guilt to specific actors, requires reparation, and reforms its procedures, can discharge its guilt without in any way transforming the attentional habits, perceptual defaults, and structural arrangements that produced the failures as regular, predictable outputs. The guilty parties are formally absolved; the structural conditions remain intact; the cycle begins again. This is what Williams means when he argues that the dominance of guilt in modern moral culture represents not a moral achievement but a moral impoverishment. By elevating guilt as the supreme moral emotion, modern moral philosophy has, paradoxically, made it easier to be systematically unjust, because it has provided a mechanism through which injustice can be regularly acknowledged, regularly discharged, and regularly reproduced without ever confronting the identity-level question that genuine transformation would require. Guilt, in this sense, is a conservative moral emotion: it preserves the structural conditions that produce injustice by providing a management system for its individual manifestations that leaves those conditions undisturbed.

The relationship between this diagnosis and the mechanisms of epistemic domination analyzed in the preceding chapters is direct. Testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, and the institutional production of ignorance are all, in different ways, tend to be perpetuated by guilt-management systems. Testimonial injustice

tends to be perpetuated because the guilt of individual hearers who have deflated a speaker's credibility can be discharged through acknowledgment and apology without transforming the attentional habits and credibility hierarchies that produced the deflation. Hermeneutical injustice tends to be perpetuated because there is no specific transgression to feel guilty about — the absence of adequate interpretive resources does not have a guilty party — and guilt therefore provides no motivational resource at all for the work of developing richer, more inclusive conceptual frameworks. And the institutional production of ignorance tends to be perpetuated because institutions can manage their epistemic failures through formal accountability without examining the structural arrangements and cultural priorities that produce ignorance as a systemic output.

When it comes to guilt the connection to Gilead becomes most illuminating. Guilt is an instrument that oppressive systems can deploy with extraordinary effectiveness against the very subjects whose resistance they seek to suppress. A guilt-based moral culture is uniquely susceptible to this deployment because guilt is directed inward: it turns the subject's critical energies toward her own particular transgression rather than toward the structural conditions that have produced her situation. Gilead's Red Centre is, in this precise sense, a guilt-production facility. The Aunts' central pedagogical project, the confession of sins, the acknowledgment of pre-Gileadean "wickedness," the ritualized self-accusation of the Testifying, is designed not to produce genuine moral reflection but to channel the cognitive and emotional resources of the Handmaids into the perpetual management of guilt, leaving no remainder for the structural analysis that resistance would require. A subject absorbed in the management of her own particular transgression cannot simultaneously ask: what kind of system has produced the conditions

in which my "transgression" became possible? Guilt is the emotional mechanism through which domination naturalizes itself by making its subjects its own disciplinary agents.

It seems plausible that what applies to Gilead applies, in a more moderated form, to our own societies. A structurally similar guilt-management logic operates, in moderated form, in modern liberal democracies. They provide the emotional and institutional discharge that makes it possible to acknowledge injustice without confronting the identity level question that genuine transformation would require: what kind of people we are, collectively, if this is the world we have produced and continue to produce? Guilt, by design, does not ask this question, and as long as it does not the structural machinery of epistemic domination will continue its operation regularly acknowledged and reproduced, generation after generation.

Let us turn to shame. If guilt is the emotion of reparation, shame is the emotion of reconstruction. This distinction, developed with philosophical care by both Williams and Fussi, is the key to understanding why a transition toward a shame-based moral culture would open possibilities for social and epistemic evolution that guilt systematically forecloses. Williams's account of shame in *Shame and Necessity* is grounded in a careful reconstruction of the moral psychology of Greek literature, which he offers not as a nostalgic model to be imitated but as a resource for understanding what modern moral culture has lost in elevating guilt at shame's expense. The Greek ethical world, as Williams reads it, was not one in which guilt was absent but one in which it had not yet been isolated as a distinct moral emotion with its own autonomous logic. Shame (*aidos*) was the primary moral emotion, and its structure was fundamentally different from the guilt that modern moral philosophy has made central. The most philosophically important feature of Williams's

analysis is his account of what he calls the "internalized other" in shame. When one feels genuine shame, Williams argues, one is not relating to an abstract moral law or to a universal standard of rule-compliance. One is relating to a specific kind of witness: an imagined observer whose perspective one has internalized as one's own, whose evaluative standards one genuinely endorses, and whose actual or imagined assessment of what one has done produces in one the specific experience of shame, the experience of being seen as having failed to be who one's own values require one to be.⁴ This internalized other is not the Kantian moral legislator, not the utilitarian impartial spectator, not the abstract judge of universal law. It is what Williams calls a "significant other" in a deep sense: a figure whose evaluation matters to the subject because it expresses standards that the subject takes to be genuinely hers, bound up with what she cares about most deeply and what she takes to constitute her identity.

The consequences of this structure are transformative. Because shame is directed at who one is rather than merely at what one has done, it connects moral failure to the question of character in a way that guilt cannot. To feel genuine shame is not merely to acknowledge that one has violated a rule; it is to recognize a discrepancy between who one has revealed oneself to be and who one's own deepest values require one to be. This recognition cannot be discharged through reparation, because reparation addresses the action, not the self. It demands instead the kind of genuine self-examination and self-reconstruction that Williams places at the center of the same experience: the willingness to see oneself clearly in the moment of failure, to understand what that failure reveals about the character that produced it, and to undertake the difficult and ongoing work of becoming someone whose character would not produce such failures. This is the sense in which shame is a *reconstructive* rather than merely

punitive emotion. It does not merely demand that one pay a debt; it demands that one become a different kind of person. And this demand, which guilt by design does not make, is precisely what social and epistemic evolution requires. It is natural to think that a society in which moral failure is consistently experienced as a question of character, as a question of who one is and who one is choosing to become, is also a society in which the habits, dispositions, and forms of care required for genuine epistemic justice are actually under cultivation. A society in which moral failure is consistently managed through the assignment and discharge of guilt is a society in which those habits are regularly bypassed and never developed.

Per una teoria della vergogna provides the philosophical theory that William's more literary and genealogical work does not contain and that the present argument requires²⁵⁹. Fussi's central contribution is the development of a precise account of the structure of shame as an emotional experience with its objects, conditions, relationship with identity and specifically moral significance. This allows us to compare and contrast shame and guilt with philosophical rigor. The first and most important element of Fussi's theory is the claim that shame is constitutively connected to values relevant to one's own identity. This connection is what distinguishes shame from mere embarrassment, from the feeling of being observed and negatively evaluated, and from the external imposition of social sanction. To feel genuine shame, on Fussi's account, is to recognize that something one has done, or failed to do, violates or falls short of values that one holds as genuinely one's own, values that are not merely externally imposed but internally constitutive of one's sense of who one is. Shame is, in this sense, an

²⁵⁹ Fussi Alessandra, *Per una teoria della vergogna*, ETS Edizioni, 2018. The book's central polemic target is the tradition that has presupposed the superiority of guilt as a moral emotion, and its central constructive contribution is the theory of shame as an identity-reflexive, intersubjectively grounded, and morally generative emotion. See the presentation of the book's project in its Introduction, pg 7-14

identity-reflexive emotion: it holds up to scrutiny not just an action but the self whose values the action has violated, and it is an experience of the discrepancy between who one is and who one's values require one to be as a form of self-diminishment that calls for genuine response²⁶⁰.

A second key element is what Fussi describes as “the double movement of shame”: the simultaneous presence of a critical attitude toward oneself and an impulse to protect something precious and private that one takes oneself to have compromised or exposed. This double movement is philosophically decisive because it shows why shame, unlike guilt, is not purely backward-looking. The protective impulse in shame, the desire to cover, withdraw, or conceal what has been exposed is not merely an escape mechanism or a flight from accountability. It is the expression of a concern for the values and self-understanding whose violation shame registers: a concern to protect what is most deeply one's own precisely because it has been revealed to be at stake in the failure. It is this protective concern that makes shame generative: the emotion that is trying to protect something is simultaneously the emotion that is oriented toward its reconstruction. One does not merely want to have not done what one has done; one wants to recover the self whose values made the doing shameful. Guilt wants to undo the past; shame wants to build the future²⁶¹. A third element of Fussi's theory that is essential for the present argument is her careful analysis of the role of intersubjectivity in shame. Fussi argues, against what she takes to be a superficial reading of shame as a purely social emotion, that shame does not

²⁶⁰ Fussi, 2018, pg 15-43. The claim that shame is connected to values relevant to one's identity, rather than merely to the violation of external rules is the foundational theoretical move of Fussi's book and distinguishes her account from treatments of shame that reduce it to social sanction or the fear of negative evaluation.

²⁶¹ *Ivi*, pg 44-78. On the double movement of self-critical awareness and the protective impulse toward what is most precious and private in one's self-understanding, see particularly 55-67.

require the actual gaze of others, since one can feel genuine shame when completely alone, and one can be entirely indifferent to the negative evaluation of those whose values one does not share. What shame requires is the perspective of an internalized other whose evaluative standards one genuinely endorses: the perspective, in Williams's terms, of a witness one respects. This means that shame is compatible with, and indeed expressive of a form of moral and epistemic autonomy. Genuine shame is not social conformity; it is the expression of one's own values in the face of one's own failure to live up to them, mediated by the perspective of an other whose authority the subject herself has conferred through her endorsement of the values they share²⁶².

This account of shame's relationship with intersubjectivity has profound implications for the question of social evolution. A moral culture organized around shame - as Fussi theorizes it - is not a culture of social conformity or external surveillance. It is a culture in which individuals are constituted as moral subjects through their internalization of the values of a community whose standards they genuinely endorse, and in which moral failure is experienced as a discrepancy between who one is and who those values require one to be. Such a culture is, by its structure, one in which moral development is possible, because the internalization of community values does not freeze the subject in a fixed identity but orients him or her toward the ongoing work of becoming someone whose character adequately expresses those values. Moral evolution is built into the shame experience: every moment of genuine shame is simultaneously a moment of self-understanding and a motivation for self-reconstruction.

²⁶² Fussi, 2018, pg 79-115.

The argument to the conclusion that shame is a more adequate moral emotion for social evolution than guilt can be developed further by examining the relationship of shame with two dimensions of collective life that the preceding analysis has consistently identified as crucial: the transmission of epistemic heritage across generations, and the expansion of collective consciousness toward a more adequate understanding of the structural conditions of injustice. The concept of epistemic heritage, as it emerges from the analysis of this thesis, refers to more than the transmission of specific items of knowledge. It refers to the transmission of the habits of attention, the epistemic virtues, the interpretive resources, and the moral-emotional dispositions that constitute a community's capacity for epistemic self-governance, its capacity to know itself accurately, to recognize its own injustices, and to develop the conceptual and practical resources required to address them.

A guilt-based epistemic culture transmits epistemic heritage in a specific but problematic way. It passes on to future generations the formal acknowledgment of past wrongs like the documentation of injustice committed, the record of guilt assigned and partially discharged, without transmitting the deeper transformation of character and community that those acknowledgments presuppose if they are to be more than formal gestures. Subsequent generations inherit a record of guilt without inheriting the identity-level questions that genuine shame would have required the preceding generation to confront: about what kind of people we were, and what our deeds reveal about the cultural habits, attentional dispositions, and structural arrangements that produced our failures. The result is the peculiar phenomenon – familiar from the history of many societies – of communities that formally acknowledge injustices that they continue structurally to reproduce. This is a characteristic of communities that

have processed their past through guilt without undergoing the identity-level transformation that processing through shame would have demanded.

A shame-based epistemic culture would transmit epistemic heritage differently. Shame is identity-reflexive, because it connects moral failure with the question of who one is and who one is becoming, the transmission of shame in a collective context involves the transmission not only of a record of failure but of the ongoing question that Failure forces a community to confront a deeper question about its own identity: whether the values it claims to hold are compatible with the fact that it produced those failures. This question cannot be closed by formal acknowledgement. It would remain alive after it, pressing, demanding continued attention to the ways in which the structural conditions that produced past injustices continue to shape present arrangements. A community that has genuinely processed its injustices through shame does not merely acknowledge them; it understands them as revelations of its own character, and takes that understanding as an ongoing orientation toward the cultivation of the different character that its own values require. The implications for epistemic heritage specifically for the transmission of the conditions of epistemic justice across generations, are direct. The epistemic virtues that the preceding analysis has consistently identified as the dispositional ground of epistemic justice, such as Medina's kaleidoscopic sensibilities, Fricker's critical epistemic openness, and the capacity for the mutual recognition that counter-narrative requires, are precisely the kind of virtues that shame-based moral education is designed to cultivate and guilt-based moral education systematically fails to address. They are virtues of character, not of rule-compliance: they cannot be produced by the assignment and discharge of guilt for specific epistemic failures,

because they are not responses to particular failures but ongoing dispositions that shape how one relates to other knowers, to one's own credibility judgments, and to the interpretive frameworks through which one makes sense of the world. They are developed through the kind of identity-level self-examination that shame demands, and they are transmitted not through the documentation of past wrongs but through the cultivation, in practice, of the habits of attention and care that make their repetition less likely²⁶³.

The expansion of collective consciousness, the broadening of a community's self-understanding toward a more adequate grasp of the structural conditions of its own injustices, follows the same logic. A guilt-based consciousness manages its awareness of injustice by assigning it to specific transgressors and specific moments; it produces a map of guilt that is always already complete, always already discharged, always already past. A shame-based consciousness cannot achieve this closure, because shame does not ask whether the transgression has been adequately punished but whether the self that committed it has been adequately understood and adequately transformed. Applied at the collective level, this means that a shame-based social consciousness is constitutively oriented toward an ongoing and never-completed project of self-understanding: the project of asking, generation after generation, what the structures we have inherited and continue to reproduce reveal about who we are and who our own values require us to become.

This is the form of consciousness that makes genuine epistemic evolution possible. Not the consciousness that acknowledges injustice and manages guilt, but the consciousness that takes injustice as a revelation of its own character and undertakes the long, difficult, and necessarily collective work of becoming better. The mechanisms of

²⁶³ Medina, 2013, pg 197-231; Fricker, 2007, pg 169-175

epistemic domination analyzed in this thesis - testimonial injustice, hermeneutical marginalisation, institutional ignorance, cognitive erasure - cannot be dismantled by guilt-management systems, because they are not the products of specific transgressions that can be assigned, discharged, and closed. They are the products of structural arrangements, cultural habits, and attentional dispositions that are reproduced through the ordinary functioning of social life, not through the exceptional transgression of individual bad actors. Addressing them requires the kind of identity-level questions that shame, but not guilt, can motivate: what kind of community are we, if this is the epistemic culture we have produced? And who do our own deepest values require us to become?

Any intellectually honest argument for producing a culture where shame is a moral-emotional alternative to guilt must confront, directly and without evasion, the fact that shame can and has been pervasively weaponized by oppressive systems to destroy precisely the identity and self-understanding that genuine shame is designed to protect and reconstruct. This is not a marginal objection. It is an observation that goes to the heart of the philosophical analysis and demands a careful and principled response. Indeed, it is worth noticing that Gilead's moral architecture is, in significant part, an architecture of imposed shame. The regime does not rely only on guilt to control its subjects; it also deploys shame, particularly the shame of women's bodies, of pre-Gileadean sexual autonomy, of intellectual ambition, of maternal or professional identity as a mechanism of subjection. The Aunts' pedagogy at the Red Centre is designed to make Handmaids experience their authentic identities as sources of shame: to internalize the regime's values as their own, to experience their pre-Gileadean lives as violations of standards they now endorse, and to feel the specific identity-level diminishment that genuine

shame produces but in the service of a self-destruction rather than a self-reconstruction.

This is arguably the deepest form of epistemic violence that the regime perpetrates: not merely the suppression of knowledge but the corruption of the moral-emotional apparatus through which knowledge is related to identity. By weaponizing shame, Gilead does not merely make its subjects feel bad; it colonizes the very faculty through which they could have recognized their situation as unjust and themselves as its victims rather than its perpetrators. A Handmaid who has genuinely internalized the regime's shame, who has come to experience her own subjectivity, her own desires, her own pre-Gileadean knowledge as violations of values she now holds as her own is a subject who has been epistemically devastated at the most fundamental level, because the emotional faculty through which she could have navigated toward justice has been turned against her.

The sharp philosophical distinction between guilt and shame that Williams and Fussi advocate is therefore not merely academically important but politically essential. Williams is explicit that the "internalized other" in genuine shame must be a figure whose evaluative standards the subject themselves genuinely endorses, not a figure whose standards have been imposed through coercion, conditioning, or the systematic destruction of alternative value-frameworks²⁶⁴. Genuine shame is felt in relation to the witness of someone who represents values that the subject takes to be authentically hers; imposed shame is felt in relation to the internalized voice of a system whose values have been installed through the very mechanisms of epistemic domination that the preceding analysis has described. Fussi's theory deepens this distinction by connecting it to

²⁶⁴ Williams, 1993, pg 84. The condition that the internalized others represent values the subject genuinely endorses is essential to Williams's defense of shame against the objection that it is merely a mechanism of social conformity.

the protective impulse that she identifies as a defining feature of authentic shame. Genuine shame, she argues, involves the impulse to protect something precious and private, something that one values deeply and that the failure has exposed or compromised²⁶⁵. This protective impulse is precisely what distinguishes authentic shame from its imposed counterfeit: in authentic shame, what one is trying to protect is one's own most deeply held values and the sense of self that those values constitute; in imposed shame, what the system is trying to destroy is exactly this such as the subject's own values, the subject's own sense of self, the subject's capacity to protect anything from the regime's total claim. The feeling might be phenomenologically similar, but the moral structure is diametrically opposed.

The implications for a practical account of shame-based moral culture are precise. A society organized around shame in the authentic sense – the sense that Williams and Fussi theorize – is not a society of surveillance, social sanction, or the policing of conformity. It is a society in which individuals are related to values that they take to be genuinely their own, and in which failure is experienced as a discrepancy between who one is and who those values require one to be. Such a society is only possible under conditions in which individuals have genuine access to the process through which values are formed, in which the epistemic conditions of valueformation are themselves just. This is the deepest connection between the theory of shame and the epistemological argument of this thesis: a shame-based moral culture presupposes the very conditions of epistemic justice whose production the thesis has traced, because only in conditions of epistemic justice can individuals form values that are genuinely their own, rather than the internalized voice of a system

²⁶⁵ Fussi, 2018, pg 55-67. The distinction between the protective impulse of authentic shame and the self-destructive dynamic of imposed shame is philosophically crucial and runs throughout Fussi's analysis of the difference between shame, humiliation, and externally produced self-loathing.

that has colonized their self-understanding. This means that the argument for a moral culture of shame and the argument for epistemic justice are not merely complementary but mutually constitutive. Epistemic justice is the condition under which authentic shame becomes possible; authentic shame is the moral-emotional mechanism through which epistemic justice can be genuinely cultivated rather than merely formally required. The two projects are, at the deepest level, the same project: the project of producing social conditions in which subjects can know themselves accurately, relate to their own failures as revelations of their own character, and undertake the ongoing, collective, never-completed work of becoming a community whose epistemic and moral practices adequately express the values to which it is genuinely committed.

The connection between the guilt/shame analysis and the specific mechanisms of epistemic domination analyzed in the preceding chapters can now be stated with the precision that the full theoretical development makes possible. The mechanisms of epistemic oppression, testimonial injustice, hermeneutical marginalisation, cognitive erasure, the institutional production of ignorance perpetuate themselves through a cycle that is simultaneously political, institutional, and moral-psychological. At the political and institutional level, the cycle is driven by the structural arrangements that Chapter 2 described: the categorical frameworks that extract and appropriate knowledge, the archival practices that manage memory, the credibility hierarchies that determine whose testimony counts. At the moral-psychological level, the cycle is essentially driven by the emotional structure of guilt: by the capacity of guilt-management systems to acknowledge specific manifestations of epistemic injustice without confronting the structural conditions and

cultural habits that produce them, and thereby to discharge the moral pressure for transformation without undergoing it.

Shame, in the authentic sense that Williams and Fussi theorize, interrupts this cycle at the moral-psychological level by refusing the discharge that guilt provides. When a community relates to its epistemic failures through genuine shame rather than managed guilt, it is forced to confront a basic identity-question that guilt allows it to avoid: what these failures reveal about the kind of community it has become. The novel's Handmaids perform, in the fragments and traces that the preceding analysis has recovered, exactly this kind of identity-level self-understanding. What they preserve in their whisper networks, their coded phrases, their averted glances that see anyway, is not primarily information though information is part of it. What they preserve is a form of self-relation: the capacity to experience the gap between who they are in Gilead and who their own values require them to be as a form of genuine shame, rather than as the managed guilt that the regime's architecture is designed to produce. This gap between the performing body and the resistant self, between the recited formula and the private irony that hollows it out, between the declared happiness for Japanese tourists and the eyes that meet just slightly too long is the site of authentic shame in Fussi's sense: the space in which the subject holds onto something precious, something that the regime has not entirely succeeded in destroying, something whose protection and eventual reconstruction constitute the ongoing project of resistance.

The conclusion to which this extended analysis points is one that goes beyond the scope of any single thesis to implement but whose direction it has been this thesis's work to clarify. A society capable of genuine epistemic and social evolution, a society that does not perpetuate, generation after generation, the mechanisms of epistemic

domination that the preceding analysis has described is not simply a society with better institutions, more inclusive interpretive frameworks, and more robustly enforced anti-discrimination norms. It is a society organized, at the level of its moral-emotional culture, around shame rather than guilt: around the identity-level question of who we are and who we are becoming, rather than around the transgression-level question of what rules have been violated and what debts remain unpaid. Such a society would cultivate, through its educational practices, its institutional cultures, and its forms of collective self-understanding, the specific moral-emotional dispositions that authentic requires: the capacity for identity-reflexive self-evaluation, the sensitivity to the ways in which structural failures reveal structural character, the willingness to experience collective injustices as questions about who we are rather than as occasions for the assignment and discharge of individual guilt. It would transmit, across generations, not only the record of past wrongs but the ongoing question they pose to the community's self-understanding: whether it has truly learned from those failures or is reproducing their structural conditions under new names.

This is, ultimately, what epistemic justice requires and what guilt-based moral culture systematically fails to provide: the genuine transformation of the conditions of knowledge, credibility, and intelligibility that would allow all subjects, regardless of their social position, to participate fully and on equal terms in the collective epistemic practices through which social reality is constituted and contested. That transformation is not impossible. But it requires a different relationship with moral failure than the one that modern guilt-based culture has made its default. It requires the courage — the parrhesiastic courage that section 3.5 analyzed — to experience one's failures as revelations of one's character rather than as debts to be

discharged; the wisdom to transmit to future generations not only the knowledge of past injustices but the ongoing question of what those injustices reveal about who we are; and the imagination seen in Medina's resistant imagination, Hartman's critical fabulation, to conceive, against the grain of structural arrangements that tend toward their own reproduction, a different kind of epistemic community than the one we have inherited and continue, in our guilt-management systems, to produce. Philosophy, at its best, does not resolve the problems it examines. It clarifies them by renders visible the structures that domination depends on its subjects not seeing, provides the conceptual resources through which those structures can be named and contested, and opens the analytical space in which the work of genuine transformation can begin.

This thesis has attempted exactly that work, across the full range of mechanisms through which epistemic domination operates. The final contribution of this concluding analysis – the argument that a transition from guilt-based to shame-based moral culture is a prerequisite for genuine epistemic and social evolution, not merely a supplement to institutional reform – is perhaps the most ambitious and the most speculative of the thesis's claims. It is offered not as a prescription but as a diagnosis: an identification of a level at which the reproduction of epistemic injustice is sustained that political and institutional analysis has not always adequately reached.

Atwood's *Handmaids*, in the end, preserve something more fundamental than the counter-narratives and coded phrases that surface analysis might identify as the content of their resistance. They preserve a form of moral-emotional selfhood: the capacity to experience their situation as shameful in Fussi's sense as a gap between who they are and who their own deepest values require them to be rather than as the managed guilt that the regime has

produced in them for exactly this purpose. That gap is what Gilead cannot fully close, however total its control. And it is from that gap from the space between the performed compliance and the privately maintained self that everything that might come after must begin.

The courage to maintain that gap, against all pressure to let it close, is the final form of epistemic courage that this thesis has traced. It is neither heroic nor guaranteed in its consequences. It is the ordinary, persistent, and philosophically necessary refusal to let guilt discharge what only shame can reconstruct.

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