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## An exit out of the 'hive': post-apocalyptic fictions of data capitalism and technological acceleration

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Digital technologies have come to frame the everyday interactions of our world, meshing together public and private spaces into seamless singular platforms for work, socialisation and leisure. At the centre of these transformations are the market imperatives of companies who trade in predictions based upon behavioural data, utilising a range of surveillance strategies to capture information that shapes the most effective corporate interventions into our lives. Shoshana Zuboff's 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* provides a thorough overview of these issues, constructing a new vocabulary with which to identify the forces that shape political, financial, and social processes on a global scale. However, the book maintains a liberal political alignment which reaffirms the powers of the right, advocating for a partial technological deceleration which preserves the violent political-economic foundations underpinning surveillance and technological control. This paper examines Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, two contemporary novels which test out the predictions of technodeterminist and accelerationist logic in unequivocal ways, in order to interrogate the imaginative limitations prevalent in responses to data capitalism.

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## Introduction

With each passing year, technological corporations find new, incomprehensibly complex routes to capture and channel the patterns of our everyday lives towards more profitable outcomes. For some time now, and especially since 2020, there has been little choice but to submit to the new currency of data in order to continue to live. The true human cost to digital capitalism is so deeply buried that robust theoretical critiques rarely reach the levels of visibility attained by Shoshana Zuboff's 2019 book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. The book, which was briefly a bestseller and has prompted a number of documentaries and critical discussions, provides a useful vocabulary with which to apprehend economic and political power following the acceleration of global information processes. As many reviews and critical responses to the book have highlighted, Zuboff nevertheless tends towards technodeterministic and US-centered readings of discrete social issues, locating imbalances of power and knowledge not within neoliberal capitalist exploitation, but within the novel cultural phenomena of social media and artificial intelligence. Zuboff's political scope, we might say, is too narrow to craft alternative routes out of 'life in the hive'; her concluding chapters, for example, rely upon a provincial conception of liberal democracy and privacy rights, advocating for a partial technological retrogression that will disarm corporate behavioural manipulation tactics and so curtail the surveillance strategies that have departed from preceding political-economic systems (2019: 21). Critical responses to *Surveillance Capitalism* offer diverse insights from the fields of political economy and surveillance studies, including Evgeny Morozov's meticulous review, which raises several issues with the book's critical position: because Zuboff is at pains to argue that surveillance and capitalism traffic together under a new, universal 'instrumentarian' order, the book ultimately 'normalises too much in capitalism itself' (Morozov 2019). Morozov also suggests that Zuboff's 'reformist' conclusions rely upon the contradictory logic that 'human experience should be protected from becoming a fictitious commodity, so that it can be emancipated and enriched by other commodities' (2019). It is clear that the sociopolitical and economic preconditions required for Zuboff's proposed escape route are no longer feasible, based upon a retrospective ideal of liberalism and individual rights. Emerging as a possible alternative to the ahistorical vision, contemporary accelerationism – a concept that is broadly characterised by the proposition that capitalist development should be sped up for both left- and right-wing political ends – is increasingly invoked in debates about data capitalism.

From Nick Srnicek and Alexander Williams' *Accelerate Manifesto* (2013) to Benjamin Noys' *Malign Velocities* (2014), there has been no shortage of critical reflections on Left accelerationism, a tradition which seeks to 'preserve the gains of late capitalism while

going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow' (Srniczek and Williams 2013). Working against the 'paralysis' and 'ineffectual nature' of twenty-first century left-wing political movements that are 'bereft of radical thought, hollowed out,' Srniczek and Williams advance a vision of accelerationism where technological developments and their associated infrastructures retain a 'space of possibility', containing the potential for a 'new left global hegemony [through] a recovery of lost possible futures, and indeed the recovery of the future as such' (2013). In this way, the global processes established by neoliberalism are not abandoned, but 'repurposed towards common ends' (Srniczek and Williams 2013). Based on this principle of reorientation, left accelerationist theories – and the real consequences for people living with and through such a period of acceleration – have prompted discussions in diverse fields, ranging from biopolitics to technofeminism.

The speculative philosophy of technological acceleration and deceleration features in many contemporary dystopian novels. In the two fictional texts examined here, literature expresses an ability to extend and sometimes refract the limited political consciousness expressed by *Surveillance Capitalism*, but in equally limited ways. In these particular cases, digital and cataclysmic futures are represented and carried to their logical end points, but fail to enable us to imagine beyond the prevalent modes of exploitation, individualist liberation, and crisis under capitalism. This reflects an idea shared across Marxist and literary critical studies which contends that dystopian fiction cannot be separated from a liberal conception of politics; it is too often limited by its inability to formulate a radical critique of neoliberalism, or by its emancipatory visions of the future which nevertheless remain rooted in liberal notions of individual autonomy and freedom. Annika Gonnermann identifies this as a 'post-pessimist' contemporary dystopian literary movement, one which 'presents readers a world void of alternatives besides neoliberal capitalism' (2019: 27). In this article I consider the political landscapes constructed in *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood's 2018 post-apocalyptic sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Richard K. Morgan's 2002 dystopian novel *Altered Carbon*, undertaking readings guided by lines of inquiry raised by Zuboff and other critics of data capitalism. The novels are not only connected by the limitations of their speculative imaginaries, but also by their formulations of gender and misogynistic violence in post-digital or post-human environments, committing to techno-anarchic narratives of liberation that nevertheless rely upon thoroughly essentialised representations of masculinity and femininity. These novels make for particularly interesting case studies owing to their representations of near and distant respective futures, the former a neo-Puritan theocracy that mimics the past before returning to a presumably capitalist liberal democracy, and the latter a cyberpunk

dystopia that amplifies neoliberal values of individualism, wealth accumulation, and military/police authority. Following Fredric Jameson, who suggests that although science fiction is typically described as ‘an attempt to imagine unimaginable futures, [its] deepest subject may in fact be our own historical present’ (2005: 345), the specific representations of futurity and pastness in the two novels offer us the opportunity to reflect upon our current historical context and the theoretical texts which interrogate it. Published over a decade apart, the settings of these science fiction novels nevertheless resonate particularly well with the concerns of the present, demonstrated by their vast popularity and the prominence of their political visions, widely disseminated beyond their print form as recent television series in particular. To shed light on the convictions which underpin these novels’ unequivocal approaches to technology, surveillance and gender, I will first of all review the accelerationist positions that appear in current debates about technological liberation before bringing this framework to bear upon *The Testaments* and *Altered Carbon*, revealing how popular fictional and theoretical speculations on the digital trajectories of the twenty-first century exist in the same liberal political alignment.

One widely-reproduced corporate narrative has emerged in the face of climate change which holds that highly advanced forms of AI will be able to undo the legacy of industrial capitalism, making way for an ecologically sustainable trajectory for humanity. Cary Coglianese suggests that if we are to ‘meet the demands of a sustainable future,’ governments must develop a ‘robust capacity to analyse large volumes of environmental and economic data using machine-learning algorithms,’ proposing a new era of ‘algorithmic environmental governance’ in which a tripartite of data capitalism, liberal democracy, and environmentalism may coexist (2019). Another popular perspective, espoused by Paul Mason in his 2015 book *PostCapitalism*, treats the current political and economic system more critically but is no less committed to a technologically contingent idealism: Mason claims that the tools and devices of neoliberalism can be reappropriated toward left-wing ends, using AI to draft multiple new permutations of a data-based progressive utopia in a ‘transition to a postcapitalist economy’ (Mason 2015: 16). The normalisation and celebration of the same data economy held up by Mason as a potential foundation for progressive ideals nevertheless follows directly from the discourses produced by neoliberal ideology, transforming its perpetual ‘disruption[s]’, as Clea Bourne writes, into a universal ‘common sense’ that diminishes ‘disparities in voice and hegemonic struggles favouring economically powerful institutions’ (2019: 112). Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein offer an intersectional critique of the ‘deafeningly male and white and technoheroic’ field of data science and AI in their 2020 book *Data Feminism*, articulating the many ways in

which data networks are used to consolidate and legitimate racist and sexist oppression (2020: 9). Still, D'Ignazio and Klein remain optimistic about data's potential to 'remak[e] the world' in a way that is 'informed by [a] tradition of feminist activism as well as the legacy of feminist critical thought', particularly when it is used to capture lived experience 'and aggregated with others' experiences' in order to 'challenge institutional systems of power' (2020: 8–10).

These positions take as their starting assumptions that digital technologies used to collect, analyse, and present data are economically and environmentally benign, and that it is possible to separate machine learning algorithms from fundamental capitalist imperatives of exploitation, extraction and accumulation, rather than seeing them as expressions of the social processes to which they belong. Zuboff contrasts her theoretical approach against such positions, denying the potential benefits of technological acceleration – in both left and right discourses – as examples of 'inevitablism', perpetuating the notion that data 'exerts a momentum that in some vague way drives toward the perfection of the species and planet' (2019: 225). Zuboff dismisses all forms of 'inevitability rhetoric', including that which would seek to accelerate or appropriate more recent machine learning technologies in order to break through to a more egalitarian world, as evidence of a 'cunning fraud, designed to render us helpless in the face of implacable forces' (2019: 35). Nevertheless, Zuboff's book is frequently at risk of buying into the same narrative: her historical account of the advent of industrial technologies describes the 'first modernity' as an ultimately progressive and liberating event that enabled its attendant generation to undertake a 'modern migration from traditional lifeways' (2019: 35). Zuboff argues that this break in the historical continuum gave way to largely empowering new forms of 'communication, information, consumption, and travel,' unlike the current phase which seeks to modify and control human behaviour (2019: 35). The speed with which social networks, e-commerce, cryptocurrencies and other extraterritorial digital zones have ruptured market space certainly give the impression of novelty, but capital's utopian narrative of technological benevolence is an old one, as the vast and diverse body of literature and historiography focusing on liberalism, liberal capitalism, and the impact of modernity has shown. Among the many critical reflections on the violent legacies of the industrial revolution is David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie's important text *Disability in the Industrial Revolution*, which documents the obscured histories of disability within British coal industries, and the impact of industrial growth upon working-class people, including the disastrous injuries, fatalities, and chronic diseases caused by the demands and dangers of coalmining (2018: 3). Another important historical analysis is Andreas Malm's *Fossil Capital*, which suggests that non-renewable fuel sources were favoured

during the early stages of the industrial revolution because they offered an effective method for disciplining labour (2016: 55). The issue of contemporary control articulated in *Surveillance Capitalism* thus relies upon the construction of an ahistorical ideal of generally positive capitalist development which, for vast proportions of humanity, did not beget the wholesale improvement of life imagined by Zuboff.

Some of the most pressing issues of surveillance, as Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet remind us, are ones concerning gender, race, class and sexuality (2015). Zuboff does not examine the facets of identity which influence the key threats and felt realities of 'instrumentarian' economies and political systems, instead envisioning a universally oppressive order likened to totalitarian regimes in scope and power with serious consequences for consumer privacy rights. Dubrofsky and Magnet suggest that this is a common blind spot in theories of surveillance, pointing out that privacy is a 'limited lens' since 'it is a right not granted equally to all' (2015: 4). Beyond the specific intersection of gender, surveillance and datafication foregrounded by Dubrofsky and Amielle and D'Ignazio and Klein respectively, the relationship between left accelerationist politics and feminist theory and praxis is also often overlooked or obscured; Emma E. Wilson argues that Srnicek and Williams' strand of accelerationism resonates with a longer tradition of feminist thought, outlining the genealogy of techno- or cyber-feminist manifestoes and essays ranging from Donna Haraway's widely-cited 'Cyborg Manifesto' to the recent publication of *Dea Ex Machina*, an anthology of feminist accelerationist essays (2015: 33–34). Distinguishing her approach to left accelerationism from the celebration of the mechanised male body associated with Futurism, Wilson suggests that Haraway's feminist formulation of the cyborg 'provides a model for accelerationist subjectivity which not only avoids, but actively forecloses, imperialising oppression,' as cyborgs 'regard themselves as neither innocent, nor revolutionary – they are painfully aware of their status as "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism"' (2015: 43). Wilson's repositioning of accelerationism within cyberfeminist discourses is particularly important for our purposes, as I demonstrate in what follows that speculative representations of 'lost possible futures' beyond capitalism are not ones of liberation and equity, but instead are worlds where misogynistic violence reigns (Srnicek and Williams 2013).

### **Technological retrogression and the limitations of liberal revolution in *The Testaments***

It is within the postdemocratic enclaves of liberal accelerationism that we can locate the political convictions of Atwood's recent novel *The Testaments*, and its precursor *The Handmaid's Tale*. The speculative world of Gilead introduced in these texts resonates



with the vulnerability of Zuboff's envisioned instrumental state: after environmental crisis, the US experiences a seizure of power by a totalitarian fascist political group. In Atwood's example, environmental destruction and a worldwide shortage of natural resources causes human fertility and the birth rate to 'free-fall' (2019: 174). Crucially, Atwood stages a military coup that occurs under a functioning liberal democracy, and within a digitised world similar to our own: in the pre-Gilead society, 'Compucards' and other advanced electronic systems are implied to have functioned as useful biopolitical infrastructures for control. The coup leads to a recalibration of the economy: 'Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We're cut off' (Atwood 2012: 178). Set some years after this coup, the new state of Gilead strictly divides society along the lines of gender and class, using a fundamentalist interpretation of parts of the Christian Bible as its founding principles. *The Handmaid's Tale* is widely known for its introduction of a new hierarchy of gendered social classes, where women universally lack any influence or stake in the wider community beyond the domestic sphere, and are forbidden to read or write. The post-apocalyptic dystopia set out by Atwood interrogates the imaginative impetus behind Zuboff's vision of liberal technological regress, as it maps out the impacts of environmental and economic crisis upon the 'still-healthy' liberal institutions upon which *Surveillance Capitalism's* philosophy relies (Zuboff 2019: 519). Atwood's political landscape reveals an important blind spot in Zuboff's argument: by removing the digital infrastructure from the state, the proximity of liberal democracy to totalitarianism is laid bare. In the absence of even the most basic information technologies, strategies for behavioural control and surveillance are only exacerbated. In this way, Atwood continues a tradition within speculative and dystopian fiction which tends to foreground and interrogate obscured contemporary social issues and practices by using strategies of exaggeration, extrapolation and decontextualisation. Among many critical reflections upon this dimension of dystopian fiction, Ruth Levitas' formulation is particularly prominent; in her landmark work *Utopia as Method*, Levitas writes that dystopia 'portrays the darkness of the lived moment, the difficulty of finding a way out of a totalizing system [...] [i]t may point to the exit, but it does not suggest what we might find, or make, when we leave' (2013: 110–111). Monique R. Morgan, commenting on the shifting political movements which have informed Atwood's works from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Testaments*, points out that the sequel must 'interweav[e] [...] many temporal layers' and 'resonate with its present-day audience', despite the fact that it 'returns to the Gilead of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was extrapolated from the rise of the religious right in the 1980s' (2020). Nevertheless, for Morgan, the sequel is 'full of utopian hopes that may no longer be relevant'; the book demonstrates a 'quaintly, perhaps dangerously,

optimistic' reliance on qualities of literary education, truth, and transparency as the most important routes through which we might 'overcome tyranny' (2020).

Like a negative photographic image, Gilead offers an inverted vision of society under data capitalism. Many of the hidden abuses of liberal exceptionalism which are often overlooked are amplified in Atwood's texts: for example, the social category of Handmaids shines a light on the biopolitical implications of US poverty policies which manipulate female reproductive rights, presenting practices of state-enforced population boosting that caricatures the very real ways women are rendered vulnerable under an ostensibly democratic system. Gilead therefore serves as a hypothetical space which is well-suited to the task of testing out the shortcomings of Zuboff's position, as it provides a fictional case study of an extreme version of the argument that is only implicit in Zuboff's text: that halting digital networks, isolated from their context within the history of capitalism, will bring about the conditions for egalitarian transformation. In *The Testaments*, meticulously gathered biological and personal information about Gilead's citizens is stored inside the heavily guarded 'Bloodlines Genealogical Archive', a 'set of files, accessible only to very few', which contain the 'secret histories' of the nation's families, including that of its ruling class; this archive operates as the central machinery of the plot, as different characters attempt to access and disseminate the information within it (Atwood 2019: 35). In Gilead, genuine intimacy and collectivity with others is impossible not only because of the inability to become visible to one another – Handmaids wear veils which 'keep [them] from seeing, but also from being seen' – but because of the ban on literacy (Atwood 2012: 8).

*The Testaments* weaves together the narratives of three characters that are only ever alluded to in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Aunt Lydia, the tyrannical leader of the Aunts who is responsible for reinventing new discourses to manipulate the population of women in Gilead; Agnes, Offred's eldest child from the pre-Gilead period; and Baby Nicole or Jade, who is implied to be the child Offred bears following her pregnancy at the end of the first book. In the intervening sixteen years, Agnes is placed within a high-ranking family as a Daughter, whereas Nicole is smuggled out of Gilead and raised in Canada by undercover operatives belonging to the 'Mayday' resistance movement (Atwood 2019: 122). One of the most useful areas of analysis in *The Testaments* is its presentation of the appropriation of the dominant regime's oppressive and 'forbidden' technologies to uncover possibilities for rebellion and revolution – following a similar path to Mason's left-wing accelerationist perspective, which calls for the 'asymmetry' of 'info-capitalism' to be flipped upside down through the collective strength and knowledge of the network, 'allowing us not just to dissent, but to secede and start a new alternative' (Mason 2015: 334). The ability to subvert and undermine systems of surveillance through



intelligence gained within a sphere of disempowerment and enforced illiteracy forms the crux of *The Testaments*, as older technologies and systems of knowledge produce covert spaces of visibility across the artificial boundaries of Gilead's surveillance structure. These disguised forms of knowledge are mirrored in the liminal spaces that exist outside of Gilead, including the sites Mayday chooses to operate from. As Tom Ue writes, Nicole's perspective in Toronto foregrounds the possibilities for subterfuge in places that 'are in flux', such as empty houses undergoing renovation work or decaying urban sites in the midst of rapid gentrification, presenting ideal opportunities for Mayday to communicate with operatives in Gilead (2022:743).

The absence of political life ends up being a powerful resource for women in Atwood's world: the establishment of borders around literacy, constructed to maintain deep asymmetries of knowledge and power, forces women to communicate and negotiate with one another in innovative ways. While the patriarchal institutions of surveillance represented by the Angels and the Eyes preserve a distinctly Foucauldian space of surveillance in Gilead, Marthas and Wives develop their own currency of local intelligence in order to leverage social power (Atwood 2019: 272). Reciprocated secrets and favours form an amorphous underground information economy: 'How did the Marthas know who was where? They didn't have Computalks [...] news flowed among them as if along invisible spiderweb threads' (Atwood 2019: 232). The absence of literary materials and physical collectivity shrinks the outer limits of women's imagined, national communities down to their localised social group where political collaboration and resistance can be fostered (Anderson 2006: 141). These shifting conceptions of space and community are usefully read in light of Mason's approach to accelerationism: Mason holds that '[b]y creating millions of networked people, financially exploited but with the whole of human intelligence one thumb-swipe away, info-capitalism has created a new agent of change in history: the educated and connected human being' (2015: 9). While Gilead is, as we have seen, an inversion of digital society, the same social principle Mason is describing can be seen at work in its carefully constructed 'sphere for women', where a structure created for the purposes of preventing access to information that might threaten the ruling order actually provides an environment conducive to collaboration and resistance, operating beneath the line of sight of Gilead's authorities (Atwood 2019: 332).

Lydia's task for the duration of the book is to record incriminating information taken from the women's sphere, collate it within a 'document cache' of 'explosive' potential, and send it to Mayday operatives in Canada (Atwood 2019: 398). In the absence of tools for communicating large pieces of information across borders, Lydia uncovers older ways of transferring data which the literate Eyes and Angels

cannot immediately recognise. One example is the 'Micro-Dot camera', a Cold War-era intelligence technology which 'reduces [documents] to microscopic size' in order to be hidden in an innocuous object (Atwood 2019: 140). Communication between Lydia and Mayday is facilitated via micro-dots attached to the propaganda materials of Gileadean missionary women, bypassing Gilead's security specifically because the younger generation of women cannot read: when the secret police become aware of the existence of micro-dots, they become preoccupied with 'inspecting shoes and undergarments' instead (Atwood 2019: 347). Towards the end of the text, Aunt Lydia implants a final micro-dot into a tattoo on Nicole's arm and sends her into Canada in the disguise of a missionary. The document cache presents a conspicuous metaphor for Atwood's vision of resistance: it is an extensive accumulation of texts explicitly marked as women's knowledge sourced from the domestic communication network based on the spoken word, literally hidden and stored within the young woman's body. Nevertheless, the use of the micro-dot as a biometric 'bypass' is a troubling one for the book's themes of surveillance, ownership and dehumanisation. Martin Paul Eve, in his study of the philosophy of passwords in the twenty-first century, writes that the idea that body parts 'might be transferable entities', used as devices that store unique data to bypass authentication systems, 'has considerable implications for the definition of identity and self [...] [b]odies become conceived of as mere property and not integral to identity' (2016: 78). In a world where the text is banned and treated as a corrupting force, Atwood suggests that women's bodies and words are emancipatory tools, foregrounding latent technologies and modes of collectivity to harness them. At the same time, these technologies have a complex relationship with the partial liberation Atwood portrays, representing a return to a technologically advanced capitalist world that is brought about by the reduction of a woman's body to a biometric device.

Reading *The Testaments* in this context, we can understand that the process of acquiring the kind of literacy required to access the electronic text and the data it contains about us – represented by the 'Bloodlines Genealogical Archives' – is a key step in dismantling instrumentarianism (Atwood 2019: 35). The sharing of information to facilitate access to this data within Gilead's system propels the resistance narrative of the text, offering examples of political subversion based upon relationships of collaboration across boundaries. As Agnes shifts from the role of a Daughter to an Aunt during the second half of the book, she is taught to read and write like other Aunts: 'All the secrets I had learned, and doubtless many more, would be mine, to use as I saw fit. All of this power. All of this potential to judge the wicked in silence, and punish them in ways they would not be able to anticipate' (Atwood 2019: 309). Lydia leaves key pieces of information in files for Agnes to decode in the Archives, revealing to her the violent

circumstances of her upbringing in Gilead as the child of a Handmaid, and grooming her into the role of a political subversive (Atwood 2019). Lydia's gradual manipulation of Agnes is facilitated by a phase of intellectual empowerment, presented by Atwood as a precursor to revolutionary action. For Claire Bélisle, the evolution of literacy skills into those required to negotiate computerised tools and information have deeply 'disruptive' qualities which constitute a 'digital knowledge revolution [...] severing links that hold institutions together, toppling established assumptions about reality and de-legitimizing dominant power structures' (Bélisle 2006). Agnes' development of reading skills resonate with the mastery of the electronic text and the data it holds, positioning capitalist knowledge as a resource that can be rehabilitated by an oppressed class for subversive projects. These activities go beyond the liberation of information detailed in Mason's text, aligning more closely to the ideas set out by Srnicek and Williams, who assert that the 'tools to be found in social network analysis, agent-based modelling, big data analytics, and non-equilibrium economic models' are 'necessary cognitive mediators for understanding complex systems like the modern economy' in which we must 'become literate' (Srnicek and Williams 2013). Where Zuboff argues for institutions to curtail the onward development of digital capitalist innovation as a response to the disparities of power emerging out of it, Atwood's imagined world suggests that technology offers the chance to expose the internal contradictions of powerful regimes and undo them.

What Atwood achieves by focusing in such depth on Aunt Lydia's redemptive information-sharing nevertheless limits the novel's ability to adequately build upon the strategies of resistance used by virtually every other character in the novel. While Sophie Gilbert writes that Atwood 'challenge[s] systems of power by giving voice to the voiceless', it becomes increasingly clear as the text wears on that Atwood only gives a voice to those who serve structurally useful purposes to the text's plot (2019). *The Testaments* has a tendency to conceive of resistance only within the remit of a residual sense of liberalism, revealed through Atwood's use of formal strategies that facilitate progressive routes outward for the characters. These interventions ultimately render the underpinning philosophy of the novel unconvincing as they are realised through the presence of contrived elements that do not fit within the worldbuilding undertaken across Atwood's two books. First and most importantly is the introduction of a policy in *The Testaments* which does not appear in *The Handmaid's Tale* and offers a degree of protection to Daughters growing up in Gilead: if they express thoughts of suicide, they are permitted to escape marriage to become an Aunt instead. Atwood creates the social group of the 'Supplicants', or Aunts-in-training, which means that Agnes and her classmate Becka are granted mobility into a separate class (Atwood 2019: 34). Atwood

presents reading and writing as necessary tools for Aunts to maintain their dominance over other women; Gilead consequently permits Supplicants to acquire literacy skills as part of their formal training. The library in Ardua Hall – with a ‘Forbidden World Literature’ section, where ‘heretical’ texts have survived the ‘enthusiastic book-burnings [...] to create a clean space for the morally pure generation’ – is an incongruous yet essential feature of Atwood’s vision for political change (Atwood 2019: 4).

Atwood presents resistance as a force which cannot have a lasting impact until it is realised through legitimated institutional routes. That an explicit social category needs to be introduced simply in order for Agnes and Becka to acquire state-sanctioned skills and knowledge, with the secondary effect that those skills happen to be useful for subversion, ultimately means that the radical potential of the space of exception – occupied by all other women in the text – ends up being disregarded and even trivialised by Atwood, ironically reflected through her own characters’ contempt: ‘If you weren’t an Aunt or a Martha [...] what earthly use were you if you didn’t have a baby?’ (2019: 81). Revolutionary technologies are only appropriated within the parameters of Gilead’s strict classification of Daughters-turned-Aunts, inadvertently creating a new class structure of higher-value women based upon their relative ‘enlighten[ment]’, which crucially can only be achieved through the fulfilment of their elite roles (Atwood 2019: 170). It is strange, for instance, that the inflammatory information used to deconstruct Gilead comes from the women’s network of gossip, but the Aunts and Supplicants do not participate in this network themselves. In fact, they monitor and collect the information for their own political purposes – and are positioned as the heroes of the narrative when they decide to use it to instigate a revolution. The idea that Aunts hold superior intellectual strength to other cruel, fickle, or ignorant women is confirmed, rather than dismantled, by these moments in the text – which, considering literacy is explicitly associated with becoming ‘neither female nor male’ in the eyes of those around them, results in a curiously exclusive and conditional feminist politics (Atwood 2019: 156). Despite their subjugated and passive role, Marthas are implied to be even more complicit in the regime than Aunts, as they tend to be ‘full and true believer[s]’ in the religious ideology of Gilead and are thus more susceptible to betray those around them (Atwood 2019: 285). Although spaces of voicelessness and invisibility, enforced by a heavily militarised surveillance structure, pervade the two texts, Atwood chooses to attach key moments of resistance to characters who have a relatively high degree of social capital, and who rebel for the most part through privileges associated with their role.

Although the micro-dot’s data triggers Gilead’s ‘coming destruction’ at the novel’s climax, the actual implications of this moment become particularly unstable in light of the inner inconsistencies of the text (Atwood 2019: 404). The Republic of

Gilead reveals itself on multiple occasions to be adept at exempting the contradictory behaviour of its own leaders – enshrined by the figure of Commander Judd, who is known to murder each successive ‘child bride’ in a Bluebeard-like manner at the same time as occupying a post ‘in charge of the Eyes’, who reigns over the moral behaviour of Gilead’s population (Atwood 2019: 63). The ‘civil strife and chaos’ caused by the publication of the document cache, revealing so many ‘discreditable personal secrets’ including crimes committed within senior households of the state, instigate a series of executions which ‘thi[n] the ranks of the elite class, weake[n] the regime, and instigat[e] a military putsch as well as a popular revolt’ (Atwood 2019: 411). In this way, the regime itself is pitted against the characters as the primary antagonist of both books, but internal rebellion is eventually provoked by cruelties that transgress its established rules, not from the cruelty of the rules themselves. The dissolution of Gilead does not come about due to revelations of the systematic violence it deploys under the veneer of state legitimacy – including ritualised rape, forcing humans to ‘clea[n] up deadly radiation’, and the ‘Gilead National Homelands Genocide’, which is a topic understood well enough internationally in the text’s universe that it is taught in Canadian schools – but through records of individual hypocrisies, scandals and crimes like adultery (Atwood 2019: 51). While *The Testaments* ultimately positions knowledge and writing as the key drivers behind political and societal transformation, the novel’s potential to interrogate opportunities for collectivity and technological appropriation for those most victimised within an oppressive regime of surveillance are ignored, in favour of formal strategies that are employed to expedite the connection of the three central characters.<sup>1</sup>

On one hand, Atwood’s perspective on resistance offers a useful counterpoint from which to reflect on the shortcomings of liberal democracy and technological dissolution as antidotes for oppressive societal control, providing practical examples of the ways that latent technologies can be salvaged for the purposes of political action. Reading the process of literacy as a metaphor for seizing the right to information by ‘reading’ the electronic text offers a useful way to consider contemporary positions

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<sup>1</sup> The recent HBO television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which has aired since 2016, makes the need for these kinds of contrived changes clearer. Agnes and Nicole are the names of June’s two infant children in the television series, which suggests that the chronological gaps between the first and second book are populated by the events of the television adaptation. Atwood’s decision to bring together three characters from the television series who have major obstacles in between one another mean that Gilead’s political landscape is significantly altered in the book sequel. While there is symbolic value attached to the fact that the two characters are reunited with their mother – implied to be Offred/June – at the conclusion of the book as Gilead falls, the core action ends up being so limited by this requirement that *The Testaments* reads as though its pivotal collaborators exist only to dovetail with the renewed interest created through the TV adaptation.

on the future direction of surveillance capitalism, particularly Zuboff's and Mason's. Atwood's novels provide some examples of how Mason's view of the 'information economy' might operate in a philosophical anti-digital space, exploiting the resources and cultural norms fostered by an oppressive system to locate a viable 'escape route' that is made possible specifically by the trappings the system has created to uphold its dominance – in this case, through an economy predicated on the spoken word and the forms of collectivity which grow from it (Mason 2015: 13). On the other, the egalitarian convictions of the book are challenged by the manner in which its central plot ignores the 'explosive' potential of forceful political assertions women characters make elsewhere in the novel, including the women who 'would shout and resist' during the repeated mass-murders that Aunt Lydia recalls during the construction of Gilead (Atwood 2019: 145). Even when setting aside the issues of plausibility and the structural complications within the book, Atwood's myopic view of feminist resistance erases the deeply complex way that class, race and gender are entangled with surveillance processes, information technologies, and political resistance.

### **Cyberpunk futurism and the techno-anarchic antihero in *Altered Carbon***

*Altered Carbon* offers an insight into a capitalist universe set in the distant future, whose economic structure has accelerated far beyond the current profitable innovations of networked communication, data mining and artificial intelligence. Unlike *The Testaments*, which deals very heavily with the political fallout of environmental crisis and subsequently finds some of its most effective commentary in its presentation of reactionary technological collapse, *Altered Carbon* reveals the inefficacy of straightforward technological reappropriation in the absence of other radical social transformations. In this setting, the computerised public sphere has become firmly embedded into the organic landscape in the manner anticipated by Mark Weiser, '[woven] into the fabric of everyday life until [it is] indistinguishable from it.' (Weiser 1991). Set several hundred years after the colonisation of other planets and the discovery of 'altered carbon', a material that allows human memories and consciousness to be perfectly preserved in small circular 'cortical stacks', the novel offers a theoretical construction of a future where the world's wealthiest can afford to live forever (Morgan 2001: 221). The reader is dropped into the book's environment of 'Bay City' – an unfamiliar version of San Francisco – at the same moment as its antihero Takeshi Kovacs, an ex-military convict whose consciousness is resurrected from a long period of imprisonment (Morgan 2001: 229). Despite the fact that the 'UN Protectorate', or the inter-planetary military and administrative institution which comes to loosely replace governments, fits stacks into the spinal cords of all humans at the point of birth, most



people will go ‘into voluntary storage’ after one or two natural lifespans – a kind of death brought about by an individual’s inability to keep up with payments on their ‘sleeve mortgage.’ (Morgan 2001: 128, 75, 272). The godlike power of the corporate elite is encoded into the Biblical significance of the name used to describe them: ‘Meths [...] and all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty nine years’ (Morgan 2001: 74). Here we see a speculative actualisation of the contradictory accelerationist trajectories theorised by Noys, where the ‘networked’ proletariat transform into a ‘cyborg fantasy [...] integrating man and machine, or person and machine, to fuse and infuse living labor into dead labor (Noys 2013: 71). The technologically enhanced and ostensibly ‘liberated’ human does not signify freedom from digital capitalism but is an objectified component of it, as subjective experience is literally predicated upon the rent one pays to remain within an unimpaired, organic body. The socialist potential of an information economy is surpassed by the imposition of new capitalist innovations, underpinned by a pervasive neoliberal ideology that legitimates oppression by celebrating and incentivising excessively long life.

Morgan’s accelerated dystopia actualises some of the technological developments that David Runciman has identified as plausible threats to the current mode of democracy, as the concentrations of data brought about by machine learning now has ‘the potential to [transcend] politics’ (2018: 204). The already ‘hugely unequal life prospects’ of inherited, ever-more-concentrated proportions of wealth and power could soon be transformed by the elite’s capability to surpass the ‘vulnerability that binds the rest of us.’ (Runciman 2018: 204). In his assessment of the anti-democratic implications of data capitalism, Runciman engages with Mason’s book as a vision of ‘liberated technology’ which provides knowledge that is ‘much harder for capitalists to exploit, because in the end it does not belong to anyone [...] so long as everyone has access to the machines that contain it’ (Runciman 2001: 196). However, Runciman’s view, like Mason’s, presupposes that equal access to advanced technologies and the knowledge they contain will spontaneously balance distributions of power. Morgan’s representation of a transhuman capitalism – where all people tap in to the ‘social’ information contained within the machines as technological devices are replaced by the ‘digitised mind’ – challenges this reasoning, as the ruling elite continue to maintain a position in society which is ‘a breed apart’ from other transhumans (Morgan 2001: 75). Intensified methods for exploiting labour are introduced in *Altered Carbon*: Kovacs, a genetically modified soldier whose ‘every evolved violence limitation instinct’ has been ‘tuned out a neuron at a time,’ captures this dynamic particularly well as he envisions the human body as a literal commodity to be traded and sold for ‘spare parts’ (Morgan 2001: 265–269). Instead of an egalitarian internet network, the ‘central datastack’ of

Bay City represents ‘the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton’ described by Marx, toward which its citizens are literally and inescapably ‘taught from childhood [...] to adapt [their] own movements’ by virtue of their digital cognition (Marx 2004: 291). The ‘promise-oriented legitimacy’ (Beckert 2018: 318) of neoliberalism is preserved as the world’s ruling class cultivates an understanding of ‘subjective age’ as a symbol of power and wealth, driving forward a societal desire for immortality while maintaining a firm grip on the resources to realise it (Morgan 2001: 263). Morgan’s world eradicates most government institutions in place of corporations; other than a functioning local police force of ‘men with automatic weapons slung over their shoulders’ which operates separately from the amorphous Protectorate, there is minimal intervention from the state into its citizen’s lives (Morgan 2001: 30). This registers a problem which is shared by Zuboff and Mason’s diverging theoretical positions, revealing, at one end, the myopia of instrumentarianism as an isolated moment of anti-democratic technological development, and at the other, the propensity of neoliberalism’s material platforms to obliterate the egalitarian potential of networked cultural evolution. Kovacs, a self-interested and apathetic ‘offworlder’ who observes the perpetual crime and corruption of Earth without engaging affectively with its most brutal instances of violence and torture, does not personify Mason’s ‘financially exploited [but] educated and connected human being’ as a harbinger for meaningful change; instead, he embodies the desensitised, hyper-individualised nihilism which pervades the dominant culture of all the book’s ‘settled’ worlds (Morgan 2001: 19). Unlike other representations of developed artificial intelligence, human cognition here is trapped and exploited within the ever-accelerating technological environment surrounding it, frozen in time and unable to evolve forwards.

Although the dystopian world put forward in *Altered Carbon* challenges the notion of networked transformative action naturally and spontaneously dismantling capitalism, examples of effective human-machine collaboration and resistance are still present in the text. Morgan’s transhuman landscape carries forward Weiser’s concept of ‘ubiquitous computing’, an entanglement of invisible electronic devices and data flows merged into the physical landscape and, in this instance, into the human body (Weiser 1991). This blurs the boundaries between virtual and real space which are both seen as equally viable sites for effective life, and are thus heavily commercialised. Bay City’s underclass subsequently exist in the gap in between the two spaces, distributing their consciousness evenly across ‘virtual constructs’ and ‘real time’ depending on what they can afford (Morgan 2001: 410–411). The poorest citizens are relegated to the same space as the service cyborgs which saturate the book’s landscape, living in cheap ‘AI-managed’ hotels which are an amalgamation of holographic and physical

features, with a ‘column of fine print data’ covering the walls (Morgan 2001: 60). The two entities of digitised human cognition and humanised AI are united as they are both ‘reduced to the void of subjectivity, i.e., to [...] pure proletarian status’ in the manner described by Slavoj Žižek (2017). In his reading of Denis Villeneuve’s 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049*, Žižek recalibrates the question of ‘human’ capitalist acceleration by considering the impact transhuman technologies will have on its trajectory: ‘[W]hat we are witnessing today is nothing less than an attempt to integrate the passage to post-humanity into capitalism’ (Žižek 2017). Žižek’s reasoning opens up interesting questions about the relationship between artificially altered humans and capitalist exploitation: ‘If fabricated androids work, is exploitation still operative here? Does their work produce value which is in excess of their own value as commodities, so that it can be appropriated by their owners as surplus-value?’ (Žižek 2017). *Altered Carbon* responds affirmatively, utilising the liminality between the reality/virtuality binary to experiment with methods of transhuman political solidarity. While the androids of *Blade Runner 2049* do not rebel, some of the key moments of emancipation for Morgan’s characters are brought about as a result of cooperation between humans and AI entities who are both ordinarily ‘hardwired to want customers’, testing out Žižek’s question in the context of a data-based capitalist economy (Morgan 2001: 67).

The rebellious and emancipatory sentiment of these moments offers insights into forms of techno-anarchic liberation through a combination of organic and artificial cognition and space. Nevertheless, much of Morgan’s text presents contradictory suggestions about the nature of violence and exploitation which is alternately critiqued and justified. Kovacs, the first-person narrator and primary point of view of the novel, is deeply conflicted about whether the extreme brutality of the neoliberal world around him is a natural and necessary part of transhuman nature, or something to be resisted and overthrown. This ambivalence is best represented in Morgan’s approach to the repetitive violence done to women by men in the text, which is particularly prominent considering the book’s antihero serves as a symbol of the psychological harms of hyper-masculinised military bioengineering. Because of the new disposability of human bodies and omnipresence of the virtual sphere, entertainment in Bay City is centred around images of ‘real’ cruelty and pain: ‘what the public wants, the public pays for’ (Morgan 2001: 252). Except for a handful of supporting characters, the only livelihood that is ostensibly available to the women of Bay City is sex work, where abuse from clients is universally accepted: ‘A lot of the girls get hurt [...] Jerry’s got insurance to cover that. He’s real good about it’ (Morgan 2001: 117). The women’s ambivalence towards this violence – ‘A good whore feels what the client wants them to feel’ (Morgan 2001: 279) – goes without further interrogation by Morgan as the novel progresses. Morgan

takes this discernibly misogynistic dynamic of the text a step further, as ‘digital human storage’ offers new opportunities for psychological as well as physical trauma (2001: 169). Since virtual spaces ‘make it possible to torture a human being to death, and then start it again’, (2001: 169), Morgan commits extensive portions of the book to superlatively graphic scenes of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence within virtual ‘constructs’ that are ‘indistinguishable from the projected consciousness they are based on’ (2001: 411). In one particularly disturbing scene, Kovacs’ consciousness is downloaded into the ‘sleeve’ of a young girl ‘with copper-sheened skin’ for the purposes of interrogation, which Morgan suggests is more brutal and effective as a result of the ‘built-in helplessness’ of the (deliberately racialised and commodified) female body (2001: 164). Kovacs claims that ‘[t]o be a woman was a sensory experience beyond the male [...] No combat conditioning, no reflex of aggression. Nothing’ (Morgan 2001: 164). The subsequent reproduction of horrific scenes of torture adopt the same unerringly objectifying gaze Kovacs uses to describe women during moments of consensual sex in the book, repeating pornographic descriptions of the sleeve’s ‘young, undamaged flesh’ at length (Morgan 2001: 170). Morgan’s critical approach to the extraordinary brutality of his constructed world has little to say about Kovacs’ perpetuation of sexist, exploitative assumptions about women and the essentialism of male violence, positioning the female body as a sexual object to be observed, occupied, and injured, even as he critiques the ‘pain’ and ‘humiliation’ subjected to it through Kovacs’ own eyes (Morgan 2001: 164).

This contradiction betrays a form of biological determinism that is at odds with Kovacs’ sudden rehabilitation to the figure of a hero at the end of the text, where he seeks to rescue women ‘slated for [...] snuff’ from Bay City’s ‘sick’ elite classes through a secondary assassination plot (Morgan 2001: 486). Even as Kovacs navigates a ‘noir’ landscape, where ‘everyone is fallen, and right and wrong are not clearly defined and maybe not even attainable’ for most of the text (Adams 2018), Morgan encodes his vision of transhuman liberation within a caricature of male heroism and prowess, with the ‘battered sleeve’, ‘corpse’ or ‘mutilated legs’ of fallen women serving merely as clues that punctuate the advancement of his detective narrative (2001: 158–161). This issue is symptomatic of a broader problem with the book’s speculative conclusions on capitalist exploitation, in that Kovacs is far more preoccupied with glamourising the details of the new aesthetics and technologies dystopian Earth offers in the process of presenting the horrors that accompany them, reading like a fantasy of masculine technological dominance even as Kovacs works to undermine his city’s version of cyberpunk hyper-capitalism. Instead of the ‘unashamed[ly] utopian’ postcapitalist world envisioned by Mason, the kind of acceleration we see in *Altered Carbon* aligns

much more closely to the Futurist tropes of ‘contempt for [women]’, invoking the ‘phallic and mechanized male body over and against the feminized: soft, liquid, and organic’ (Noys 2013). It is notable that *Altered Carbon*, which was published in 2002, skips over environmental threats like climate change, pollution, and the consumption of finite natural resources in its reconstruction of the intervening centuries of Earth’s history; as a result, the aesthetics of the polluted Bay City – including ‘slopes of steel and plastic’, skies ‘clogged with cloud’, flying cars or ‘cruisers’ and pervasive ‘crude holographic[s]’ – express a continuation of a carbon-fuelled world that no longer seems possible or relevant without acknowledging environmental cataclysm (Morgan 2001: 252, 341, 522). Even though the book, like *Blade Runner 2049*, ‘provides a whole panoply of modes of exploitation’ (Žižek 2017), Morgan’s commentary ultimately fails to come to any substantial conclusions about its visceral, glamorous dystopia.

The shortcomings of Morgan’s text diverge from the formal complications present in Atwood’s, testing the boundaries of technological reappropriation in interesting ways. Nevertheless, Morgan is unable to imagine a form of rebellion that leaves behind the phallogocentric value system of Futurism – a vision of the world that remains bound to dystopic patriarchal and capitalist tyranny. While there is limited scholarly work on the *Altered Carbon* trilogy, Sara Martin reflects on another of Morgan’s detective thrillers, *Black Man* (2007), which similarly attempts to recast a hypermasculine, monstrous ex-military man and uninhibited misogynist as an anti-patriarchal figure, writing that ‘a certain dead end is reached in terms of the male writer’s use of sf; for there is no speculative undoing of the social ills caused by patriarchy’ (Martin 2017: 84). Morgan’s representations of women here are identical, and so are the issues present in *Altered Carbon*. Kovacs concludes pessimistically that ‘nothing ever will change’, that there will ‘always [be] people like [the Meths]’ to ‘cash in on the game’ (Morgan 2001: 524); in a similar manner, Morgan’s characters and landscapes are effectively frozen in time, unable to break out of the ‘freemarket deleria of cyberpunk, which assumes that capitalism is itself a kind of utopia of difference and variety’ (Jameson 2012: 125). The text’s exploration of gender is limited to the new forms of identity, sexuality, embodiment, and emancipation the dystopia’s imaginative technologies offer to men; even as Morgan successfully conceptualises resistance to transhuman capitalism by deconstructing human/artificial boundaries, this example of rebellion comes apart under the reinforcement of other binary oppositions which, in turn, enshrine patriarchal supremacy as a biological inevitability.

In each of these iterations, the left-wing formulations of feminism and transhumanism ultimately cede to limited conceptions of technological liberation, failing to envision a radical alternative to socioeconomic disparity and misogynistic

violence. Such fictions, in turn, mirror the liberal basis of prominent critical work including Zuboff and Mason's texts, and fail to identify another way of thinking. In both novels, important conceptualisations of class solidarity and collective action are complicated by notions of technology which separate it from its material context and bestow it with aestheticised or idealised significance. Despite the fact that the literary and critical texts explored here offer distinct, varied critiques of the harms of capitalism, all remain hostile to Marxist understandings of capital and labour, which in turn curtails the possibilities of Atwood's and Morgan's imaginative interventions as they become derailed by individualist preoccupations with the development of knowledge and moral sensitivities. The global platform of neoliberalism and its relentless processes of exploitation, surveillance, and control ultimately becomes a neutral backdrop upon which certain kinds of technologies and techniques for resistance are introduced or removed, but socioeconomic inequality and the subordination of marginalised people remains unchanged.

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