I Who Have Never Known Men: Feminist Resistance Meets Futuristic Biopolitics

Video transcript [written and recorded by Kendall Chan]:

I Who Have Never Known Men was published in 1995 by Jacqueline Harpman, a Belgian author and psychoanalyst who wrote and published in French. The English language edition was first released in 1997, and then again in 2019. The dystopian novel tells the story of forty women imprisoned underground for crimes unknown to them. The narrator is a nameless young girl who has spent most of her life in this cage, constantly surveilled by male guards and alienated from the older women around her by her youth and lack of knowledge about the world outside the prison. The novel engages the themes of survival in the face of hopelessness, what makes us human, and the arbitrariness of punishment and cruelty. Key to all of these questions is the notion of individual resistance, which the main character employs time and time again in order to maintain her sanity and purpose in a meaningless existence.

Harpman's book can be viewed through a feminist lens because of the inherent dynamics of interminable female imprisonment, enforced at the hands of men. As a female writer, Harpman includes realistic elements of life that do not necessarily figure into the science fiction narratives of male-centric stories. The inclusion of these details reflect the larger ando-centric trends of a world that, like this one, is not designed with women in mind. Though the male guards provide daily food, blankets, and bits of soap for the women prisoners, the narrator notes that they do not supply "sanitary towels" or toilet paper for the menstruating bodies that they have imprisoned. "The women collected the tiniest scraps of material and used them for their periods… rags they had to jam between their legs as best they could, by squeezing together their thigh muscles, since they had nothing to hold them in place." This graphic description nods towards the fleshy, sometimes grimy embodied experience of being female and being imprisoned– the cruddy minutiae of incarceration that is often overlooked because of assumptions of prisons as masculine spaces to hold masculine bodies. But as research and prisoner testimonies have showed, periods do not stop just because one is incarcerated, and menstruation can be turned into another difficulty, another psychological vulnerability, or an opportunity for resistance. Here, alongside the cruelty and inhumanity of their conditions, the women display their resilience through their creative fashioning of period products even with limited resources at their disposal. Another way that the prisoners show creativity out of a means of survival is by using hair as thread to mend and repair clothing. The women braid together individual strands to create material for small stitches, an example of the innovative use of the body to cope with the deprivations of imprisonment. By considering the realistic needs of women's bodies in incarceration, and thinking seriously about how women may meet those challenges, Harpman's work is taking a feminist approach to science fiction– rather than dismissing considerations of gender in an alternate or future world, she engages with how gender may familiarly structure a perhaps-unfamiliar world.

Harpman also explores the dynamics of biopolitics, a central feature of most incarceration experiences. The women's daily existence is dictated completely by unknown actors. The room is windowless and lit with fluorescents, preventing the prisoners from knowing what time of day it is and forcing them to conform to the daily schedule of food and sleep set by the guards. They are not told where they have come from, why they are imprisoned, and to what end they are held day after day underground. Even their sleep is enforced: a fellow prisoner warns the narrator that if the guards notice her awake during the enforced "night time", they will administer a pill to make her sleep. The cost and effort of this totalizing biopolitical control is

part of the frustrating and ominous mystery to the women, who reason: “What with the food and the continuous lighting and heating, we must have been costing someone or something a lot of money, but we didn’t know why they were going to so much trouble… What were we doing here, and why were we being kept alive?” The women themselves note that they are being “kept alive” by some kind of entity; gesturing toward Foucault’s claim that the state has surpassed the right to “take life or let live” and seized the right to “make live or let die”. Even though one woman swears, “There is not one of us who hasn’t thought of killing herself” to end their unceasing imprisonment, the guards intervene on suicide attempts and the women are quite literally forced to stay alive by the whims of a larger power. Our narrator muses on the cruelty of their captors’ operation of biopower: “The appalling threat of death, always promised, never given.” This echoes state action in response to real-life prisoners’ attempts to channel necropolitics in resistance, such as hunger strikes. Though prison authorities constantly brandish violence as a tool of discipline and control, they also take means to intervene on self-directed violence conducted by prisoners as acts of resistance, dignity, or protest, through force-feeding or other coercive methods; in effect, enforcing the maintenance of life and refusing to permit death as an escape.

Living for years in this underground cage, the women have been deliberately stripped of every belonging, resource, or bit of knowledge that could help them rebel against their captors. They have no access to books, writing, or mental stimulation. They are given blunted tools to prevent the possibility of violent uprising or suicide. In such an environment of intentional deprivation, our narrator turns to the one thing she has: her body. At first, she embarks on an individual mission of resistance by targeting a young guard to stare at relentlessly. She explains, “I’d like to make him lose his composure… To have power over him.” The guards carry whips and “forbid everything” from crying to singing to touch; they hold control over the women every day, at all hours of the day. It is a small victory to have the power to make one of her captors uncomfortable. Even if he never betrays it on his face or manner, she insists that she would “like him to be upset, worried, afraid, unable to react,” just as all of the women that he constantly patrols are every day. In choosing to stare down a single guard without breaking, the narrator displays a resoluteness akin to sumud, or steadfastness; behaving alternatively to expectations of a docile, obedient prisoner and committing to her choice despite potential punishment or backlash. She carries out her act of rebellion with nothing but her own eyes and motionlessness.

After discovering her body as a tool for disobedience, she finds other, creative ways to resist the external administration of her life. Using learned knowledge about the average number of heartbeats per minute, she begins to keep track of time using the rhythms of her body– defying the authorities’ totalizing administration of life that keeps the women in the dark and dependent on externally imposed schedules, which they begin to doubt conform to a twenty-four hour cycle, but instead function according to some whim of their captors. “I became a human clock,” the narrator declares, and has thus transformed her body into a weapon of resistance, one that she shares with the her fellow women prisoners. “We’d decided no longer to worry about the anarchic routine they imposed on us– my heart would act as our clock. One evening, as the lights were being dimmed, we decided that it was eleven o’clock, and from that moment, I would count the days as twenty-four hours, as in the past. Sometimes, when we were in the middle of lunch, joylessly eating boiled vegetables, a woman would ask me the time and I’d reply: ‘Two o’clock in the morning.’ This rekindled a spirit of rebellion in their dulled minds. We had our own time, which had nothing in common with that of those who kept us locked up; we’d rediscovered the quality of being human… we’d established an area of freedom.” In reclaiming knowledge– that

of time– that has been intentionally hidden from them as a means of control and disorientation, the prisoners have recaptured a small but meaningful measure of agency. Before, one woman describes their state of ignorance as "utter helplessness". But in marking their own time, and declaring the hour of day by their own standards, the women resist the false timetable dictated by their authorities. This feat was accomplished through the weaponization of the heartbeat, of the body.

After years of hopelessness, the other, older women re-commit to weaponizing their bodies against imprisonment. One day, the prisoners manage to escape. Faced with a dizzying freedom, they wonder about their chances of recapture by the guards. "Not me," says one of the women. "I'd rather die, I won't go back. They can drug me as much as they like, I'm sure I could turn the most carefully dosed drug into a lethal poison." Another adds, "Same here. I'll stop breathing. It must be a matter of willpower, I'm sure you can stop your heart from beating." The women are asserting what Banu Bargu refers to as "necroresistance", by declaring that they will decide when and how they live and die, rather than allowing their captors to decide for them. As Bargu notes, this transforms each woman's body from a site of subjection– to violence and subjugation– to a site of insurgency. Rather than passively succumbing to the effects of drugs, one woman insists that through her sheer desire to resist captivity, her body could become active, and transform medicine into a lethal poison. The other maintains that through her willpower alone she can enact death inside her own body; launching, as scholars have described, "death as a counterattack to the dehumanization of life" inside the prison.

Jacqueline Harpman was born in 1929 in Etterbeek, Belgium. Her father was a Dutch-born Jew, and her family was forced to flee to Casablanca when the Nazis invaded their country. She spent her childhood and teen years in exile, only returning to her home after the war's end. Harpman has not spoken at length about how her experience as a refugee has informed her writing, especially *I Who Have Never Known Men*, but the themes of community within imprisonment, senseless violence, and bureaucratic oppression certainly parallel the persecution faced by Jewish people during World War II. Throughout the novel, the narrator and her fellow women continually question the point of survival, of knowledge, of hope in a world that seems to have abandoned them, questions that prisoners around the world for decades may have asked themselves. Though the book does not provide easy, happy answers, it makes a strong case for the power of telling and relating one's story. The narrator wonders if her life, so constrained and disrupted as it were, matters. She decides that through recording her story, she can ensure her existence: "I am writing [these words] for some unknown reader who will probably never come… But if that person comes, they will read them and I will have a time in their mind. They will have my thoughts in them. The reader and I will constitute something living, that will not be me, because I will be dead, and will not be that person as they were before reading, because my story, added to their mind, will then become part of their thinking… As long as the sheets of paper covered in my handwriting lie on this table, I can become a reality in someone's mind." Telling one's story can be an act of resistance against erasure, against being hidden and being treated as disposable. Even though Harpman's work is fictitious, the questions that the characters struggle with are gravely relevant today, and it is difficult not to walk away from this book respectful of and affected by their answers.

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By Kendall Chan

This video essay gave me a chance to explore the themes of our course through one of my favorite passions: literature. Over the past year or so, I've become especially interested in feminist science fiction and dystopia, which uses alternate worlds and futures not to ignore or escape from gendered questions, but to confront and interrogate how gender can structure regimes of life. Classic feminist dystopian novels such as The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood and The Broken Earth trilogy by N. K. Jemisin often tackle current anxieties surrounding reproductive rights, exploring what present bodily control and state restrictions may look like if taken to a frightening extreme in a near-future, or set in a world where supernatural powers infuse women's bodies with higher stakes. *I Who Have Never Known Men*, by Jacqueline Harpman, addresses a topic that many forget has feminist stakes: incarceration and isolation. Globally, women make up a small percentage of the total prison population. In addition to this, gendered norms cast prisons as a highly masculinized space of power and violence, a site designed for and appropriate for men only. However, over the last decade, international rates of female incarceration has grown exponentially, even as the UN has adopted measures to develop alternatives to imprisoning women offenders (Summers 2021). And imprisoning women has its own distinct implications, effects, and issues that are of feminist concern.

Harpman explores the gendered dynamics of imprisonment to great effect. The fact that the forty prisoners are all women is never forgotten and is central to their experiences, from the way that they handle menstruation in the absence of period products, to the ways they form community once they are freed from their cage. Her dystopian imagining is not far off from the realities of many women prisoners around the world, whose menstruation practices become a

challenge and vulnerability while imprisoned (Francis 2017; Bobel and Fahs 2020). However, like the women in Harpman's novel, this bodily vulnerability can also be interpreted as a site of creative resistance and resilience. While the forty women in *I Who Have Never Known Men* fashion themselves period products due to the denial of a basic hygienic necessity, other prisoners around the world have taken the opportunity to smuggle in pads, refused to allow their captors to see them bleed, or even used their menstrual blood as a form of protest (Shwaikh forthcoming).

The theme of bodily resistance and weaponization of life in the face of incarceration is repeatedly drawn on throughout the book. The narrator's decision to continuously stare at a single guard in order to make him uncomfortable and afraid displays both a version of *sumud*, a steadfastness in which a prisoner practices a behavior alternative to or subversive of expectations, and a way in which she is able to re-appropriate her body, traditionally considered fragile and weak, and use it as a site of resistance and opposition to the power exerted by the guard over her existence. It is even more explicit when the narrator describes turning her body into a clock, or literally making her heartbeat into a tool that tracks the time, as a way to contend the artificially imposed schedule that administers her life. Through the protagonist's discovery of her heartbeat as a way to keep track of "true" time, Harpman illustrates both Foucault's notion of biopolitics– showing how an authority may exercise an all-encompassing control over the administration of life– and a way to resist it, by returning to the power of one's own body.

Through the genre of science fiction, Harpman is able to develop the gendered aspects of biopolitics. The women wonder to what end they are being kept alive. Forbidden from attempting suicide, they are in fact *forced* to stay alive by an unknown authority. The narrator ponders, "In their previous lives, the women had worked, borne children and made love. All I

knew was that these things were greatly valued. What use were we here?" (Harpman 1995, 23). This ominous mystery, at the heart of the novel, captures so much about the gendered nature of state control and biopolitics. Outside of the prison of Harpman's novel, which perhaps looks quite similar to the society we live in today, women serve a crucial function of upholding society through labors productive, reproductive, and emotive. These functions, which all contribute to the ongoing maintenance and production of a population, are of extreme state-building interest, which is why the labor participation and reproductive rights of women are so heavily contested by governments. Women's role as producers and protectors of the nation's domestic heart is so important that the narrator questions the purpose of their lives in captivity, unable to understand why a powerful entity would spend such resources to cut them off from their feminized roles in society. One way this conundrum might be explained is through a real life example of the imprisonment of suffragettes in early 20th century Britain. Hundreds of women were imprisoned in Holloway for demanding the right to vote and, faced with brutal conditions, went on hunger strikes as a mode of protest. Prison authorities responded by force-feeding women, which mirrors an instance in Harpman's novel where a woman attempts to starve herself but is "harassed" by guards until she yields (Davies 2018; Harpman 1995, 27). Why did the British government spend resources and effort detaining hundreds of women, even going so far as to force-feed prisoners to keep them alive in detention? Though their incarceration disrupted their gendered roles and value as domestic producers and caretakers, their suffrage activism also posed a threat to the stability of British home life and gender roles, thus necessitating imprisonment. Gender is thus a defining factor shaping the state's implementation of biopolitics, and the paradoxical dilemma that arises from female imprisonment.

I chose the video essay format because I thought it was important to verbalize my analysis and read aloud the powerful quotes from Harpman's book. I also wanted to connect the strong imagery in the novel to a visual display, which is why my analysis is accompanied by selected works of feminist art that I feel capture the visceral, emotive tone of the work. The visual images are mostly from female artists and evoke desolation, isolation, captivity, the body, suffering, and resistance. Along with illustrating the main points of my argument, the selected art shows that the feminist themes of Harpman's book are replicated in various mediums and time periods, by women around the world.

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