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Bodies of Silence and Space: Victimhood, Complicity, and Resistance in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the complexity of resistance and the conditions of power for women in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Using feminist theory, theories of neoliberalism, and Dominionism, this thesis works to understand the ways in which victimhood and complicity influence resistance in totalitarian regimes. I argue that neoliberal ideologies skew understandings of freedom, agency, and power in a way that ensures individuals, specifically women, remain trapped in the system. Focusing on reproduction, I examine how Gilead controls women's bodies and reproductive abilities to ensure a future for itself. The Eve-Complex is one way that the state integrates itself into the identity of motherhood; by making reproduction a state-controlled affair, Gilead effectively separates women from the identity of motherhood and uses this identity to ensure the production of a future generation of Gileadeans. Analyzing Offred, Serena Joy, and Moira, I determine the value of their respective attempts at resistance, and the implications of their role in propagating the system. Ultimately, I connect my analysis to the current events in the United States, such as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* to demonstrate the importance of reading the novel in a modern context.

Keywords

The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood. Feminist Studies, Post-Apocalypse, Dystopia, Female Power, Feminism, Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, Eve-Complex, identity, subjectivity, motherhood, neoliberalism.

Summary for Lay Audience

As a dystopian, authoritarian regime, Gilead warns what could occur in the United States if religious, extremist political parties take over. However, what makes Gilead all the more dangerous is the way in which it relies on female bodies. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood does not simply critique feminism but offers a solemn warning as to what could occur in America when politics and religion merge to establish a regime that uses bodies as an economy. As a response to Reagan and Thatcher's political philosophy in the 1980s, Gilead demonstrates the insidious ways in which underlying ideologies that capitalize on individual lives can foster generations of oppression. More importantly, Atwood demonstrates how specific terminologies, such as freedom, choice, and resistance are exploited to maintain control over people. Discussion on abortion rights indicates a paradox evident in terms such as freedom and choice; by incorporating the same language that pro-lifers use in their antiabortion propaganda, Gilead shows how by advocating for the rights and freedom of fetuses also effectively marginalizes and removes the political rights of the mother. Yet, Gilead requires women to reproduce to ensure its own futurity, and as such, female bodies become paradoxically the most valuable commodity, and simultaneously the most expendable. Under the guise of religion, state powers are not only able to influence but also rationalize the authoritarian control over female bodies as a sacrifice for the greater good. While Gilead relies on female bodies to function, it also marginalizes them; female resistance, as such, works to combat erasure by reinstating agency, subjectivity, and identity back into their bodies. This essay explores how the state of Gilead exploits and entraps women by invading not only their bodies but their minds, and what possible methods women can take to combat this invasion. It asks the question about what the value of Offred, Serena Joy, and Moira's resistance is, and whether there is any possibility of extricating the self from the system.

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Introduction

As an author, poet, and screenwriter, Margaret Atwood has left a distinct mark on the Canadian literary canon. Known for her political focus, Atwood's works now have a global reach that "developed steadily from her original interest in Canadian nationhood and politics" into works that challenge and explore themes of "[p]ower politics, feminism, international terrorism, multiculturalism and global warming" around the world (Wynne-Davies 3). Atwood's career began in 1961 after the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Double Persephone*. She published a variety of poetry books and collections before writing her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, in 1969.

It has become a truism that Atwood is perceived as something of a prophet. *The New Yorker* calls her a "Prophet of Dystopia" (Mead); an article in *Indy 100* examines "How Margaret Atwood's 'Handmaid's Tale' Predicted the Future" (Robinson); and *Slate* asks, "Margaret Atwood, Prophet?" (Finn). *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) highlights Atwood's prophesizing abilities as it explores issues about women's rights and reproductive politics, conversations that are occurring even today in 2023. In response to the reign of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. during the 1980s, the novel investigates the potential repercussions of the government forging alliances with the religious right to rationalize and institute a neoliberal system. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine neoliberalism in detail, Atwood seems to see neoliberalism turning into authoritarianism as the religious right begins to influence the political right. Jason Hackworth notes that "[t]he Religious Right has played a significant role in the formation of the political Right in the US" (324). He argues that, in the U.S., "it was not only permissible for evangelical Christians to aggressively advocate for Christianizing government, but was also their responsibility" (325). Focusing on Dominionist theology, Hackworth examines the "curious parallel rise of neoliberalism, fundamentalist religious movements, and the role they have collectively played in bonding and promoting neoliberalism as a policy framework" (332). This "curious parallel" is evident even today in Trump's calculated use and exploitation of the Evangelical right to sway support for

his party.¹ Neoliberalism's focus on the free market, privatization, deregulation and reduction in government spending, government regulation, and public ownership would seem to be antithetical to the fundamentalist and authoritarian regime of Gilead, but Atwood warns of a potential development from neoliberalism to Gileadean authoritarianism. Indeed, as a dystopian novel, the narrative warns what America could look like in the future as the Republican Party during the 1980s forms alliances with the Christian Right. Gilead represents the possible repercussions of the Republican Party's decision to merge politics and religion to consolidate absolute power over the state and to "colonize power effectively" (Harvey 49). Similarly, the regime also aligns with Reagan's advocating for an "achieved utopia"—what Berger calls the American post-apocalypse (Berger 138-140).² The white supremacy and nationalism evident in Gilead are no coincidence. Gilead is not only an imagined catastrophe but a warning about the potential real-life consequences of neoliberal decisions made during the Reagan era in the U.S. when corporate elites began negotiating with religious groups to obtain power. The potential regression into an authoritarian state like Gilead is a threat that lingers to this very day: Trump and his government recirculated similar political ideologies and alliances that haunt the U.S., and the targeting of female bodies has been especially evident. Reading the novel in a modern context while being conscious of the underlying neoliberal influence in Gileadean politics is especially important as it reveals the systemic nature of complicity, freedom, and resistance.

The Handmaid's Tale has faced a lot of scrutiny as to whether it should be read as a feminist or as a dystopian text. Atwood has been clear that dystopian novels such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* all inspired *The Handmaid's Tale*, which further emphasizes why Gilead is

¹ Articles such as, "False Idol -- Why the Christian Right Worships Donald Trump" by Alex Morris and "The White Elephants in the Room" by Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Meraji examine the role and influence of the Evangelical Christian communities in American politics.

² Reaganism was a political concept that "opposed 'big government'[,] ... supported a strong military (and continued to believe with Reagan that the Vietnam war was a 'noble cause'), opposed abortion, supported what appeared to them to be 'traditional family values,' supported a vague but powerful ideal of American community, opposed affirmative action programs for African Americans, supported severe penalties for violent crimes, opposed gun control, believed in traditional gender roles, supported prayer in the public schools, and opposed defacing the American flag" (Berger 139).

unquestionably a dystopian regime. In an interview, Atwood describes the political climate in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

Like the American Revolution and the French Revolution and the three major dictatorships of the 20th century—I say “major” because there have been more, Cambodia and Romania among them—and like the New England Puritan regime before it, Gilead has utopian idealism flowing through its veins, coupled with a high-minded principle, its ever-present shadow, sublegal opportunism, and the propensity of the powerful to indulge in behind-the-scenes sensual delights forbidden to everyone else. (“Margaret Atwood on How She Came to Write *The Handmaid's Tale*”)

As I will discuss later, Atwood considers her novel a broad exploration of political regimes. She explains that she was more fascinated by the totalitarian regime in *The Handmaid's Tale* and its effects on the people in the nation than she was in making a feminist statement. As such, she refuses the categorization of the novel as a “feminist dystopia” by claiming that “[i]n a feminist dystopia pure and simple, all of the men would have greater rights than all of the women. It would be two-layered in structure: top layer men, bottom layer women” (“Margaret Atwood on How She Came to Write *The Handmaid's Tale*”). Despite Atwood’s explanation, there is an evident disparity of power between the genders, and it is this disparity that I will examine in my thesis. In my analysis of Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy’s attempts to resist their oppression, I consider the value of storytelling, violence, as well as subverting the gaze and identity in order for each individual woman to survive and exploit the system. I argue that, in positions of oppression, using the system to regain a sense of individuality is a vital steppingstone for women to try to establish some sense of autonomy in Gilead. By negotiating new spaces for themselves, women can challenge the authority of their oppressors without risking their own survival. Inevitably, however, Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy’s modes of resistance inhibit the chance to dismantle and revolt against Gilead, thereby reproducing the system itself. My section on “Motherhood and the Eve-Complex” takes the concept of revolting against the system by reinstating individuality and examines how Gilead uses the image “of the mother as salvation” to oppress women by removing them of their bodily autonomy, which I refer to as the Eve-Complex. The Eve-Complex allows the

state to capitalize on female biological function, blurring the line between what it means to be a woman and a product of the state; resisting, therefore, occurs in the reclamation of individual motherhood and autonomous choice. The sections on the Eve-Complex are important because they demonstrate the ways in which religion and politics make motherhood a necessity for the survival of the new world. These sections read Gilead as a post-apocalyptic society to show how the new world recycles old ideologies that continue capitalizing on the female reproductive system and how this repeating cycle of politics exists even in imagined futures. Locating the narrative in modern times, I will conclude by arguing that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a narrative that should be used as not only a warning for the potential future, but also one for our present. I will discuss how my analysis of female resistance can extend into today with the overturning of *Roe. v. Wade* in the United States.

Literature Review

Research on *The Handmaid's Tale* has most often been focused on the complex relation between resistance and complicity. Many academics have taken the time to consider whether or not Offred is a figure of feminism or resistance. In her article, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a multidimensional critique of rebellion," Asami Nakamura examines how the novel complicates rebelliousness and "demands that readers be aware of the risk of misinterpreting the victim's story and thus dismissing its power to the status quo" (8). According to Nakamura, Atwood calls her novel "protofeminist" because the women do not actively resist their oppression. Offred, for instance, finds "[t]he idea of choice which might liberate [her] ... is rather shockingly intimidating" (6). As such, Nakamura argues that the text cannot be defined as feminist but rather as a critique of feminism because the characters do not actively fight for their freedom. Focusing on Offred's passivity, Nakamura argues that Offred's perception of herself as emptied "can be interpreted as a result of her melancholic state of mind" which "prevents her from endorsing any causes including feminism, let alone American (pseudo-)liberalism or Gileadean (cynical-)fundamentalism" (18). More than as a figure of rebellion, Nakamura views Offred as a victim who is in the process of surviving. In

this way *The Handmaid's Tale* “offers not only a critique of rebellion, but also that of interpretation, by questioning how victim’s voices have to be assessed” (21). What can be defined as spaces of resistance, such as her romance with Nick, storytelling, and memory, may not seem like resistance because they come from a place of victimhood. However, Nakamura does not devalue such actions. Instead, she emphasizes how it is important to note and consider the complex nature of Offred’s resistance.

Nakamura investigates how Offred challenges the typical representation of female figures in dystopian fiction (6). Using Atwood’s comment on creating Offred as an attempt “to establish a female figure beyond the stereotypes of the genre,” Nakamura demonstrates the importance of viewing the nuance in Offred’s decisions.³ Where women are posited as the other and reduced to their reproductive function, Offred is “an intellectual female ... who strives to defy such assigned roles” and yet is “far from being a straightforward figure of hope and change” (6). What Offred offers to the dystopian fiction genre, according to Nakamura, is a multi-dimensional human being, who happens to also be female, learning to survive as a victim. Most relevant in Nakamura’s reading of Offred is the importance of absences and blank spaces. Offred’s nostalgia for the past is a reflection of her political ambiguity: “what is revealed in her recollection of the pre-Gilead era is far from being exuberant; her memory is as smeared with fear and anxiety as is her present experience” which “represents her acute sense of helplessness against the power of men in a previous era” (13). As a woman, Offred is placed in the “gaps” or “the blank white spaces” (Atwood 68). Nakamura demonstrates how these spaces represent “the undeniable possibility that one might be a victim in tomorrow’s paper,” and how Offred’s time in Gilead pushes her to become aware of the fact “that until this point she had been willing to refuse to acknowledge this precariousness of life” (13). It is

³ Nakamura quotes Margaret Atwood from the text *In Other Worlds* where she claims that she created Offred in response to nothing that “[w]hen women have appeared in [dystopian fiction narratives], they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who’ve defied the sex rules of the regime. They’ve acted as the temptresses of the male protagonists, however welcome this temptation may be to the men themselves. Thus Julia, thus the cami-knicker-wearing, orgy-porgy seducer of the Savage in *Brave New World*, thus the subversive femme fatale of Yevgeny Zamyatin’s 1924 seminal classic, *We*. I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view—the world according to Julia, as it were. However, this does not make *The Handmaid’s Tale* a “feminist dystopia,” except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered “feminist” by those who think women ought not to have those things.” (146)

this very “grim continuity between her past and present” that prevents Offred from finding “any reassurance in her memory” (14). Her memory, Nakamura concludes, does not provide Offred any escape.

Building on Nakamura’s reading, my thesis aims to provide an alternative reading of space. The gaps that Offred defines as where women reside not only reveal the threat of the “precariousness of life” for women, but also reveal an alternative space where women are able to survive (Nakamura 14). I argue that it is important to view the novel itself as a recollection of these “gaps” that women have not only been pushed into, but that they themselves embody. I offer, therefore, an alternative reading to Nakamura’s comparatively nihilistic analysis of Offred’s rebellion. Whereas, according to Nakamura, “it is doubtful whether [Offred] ever had a sense of rooted subjectivity or not, that is even in the time before Gilead,” I argue that it is within the space of this gap or void that Offred is able to form her subjectivity (15). Gilead does change Offred’s perspective on the fact that women never were free even before Gilead (something both her mother and Moira realized and tried to tell her), but what I would like to focus on is how this space where women exist is also a space that Offred makes tangible and valuable through her recordings of their stories. For instance, one way that Offred resists her role as Handmaid is by exploiting her value as a mistress for the Commander. Her relationship with the Commander, and her role as the mistress, are alternative spaces that allow her to navigate and redefine her subjectivity on her own terms. She ultimately sells her body not only to fight against Gilead (through rule-breaking), but also forms an autonomous identity apart from what Gilead imposes. The spaces and gaps are important because they are the only places where women are able to be rebellious.

Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson interrogate the relationship between resistance and complicity in Offred’s actions throughout the novel. They argue that Offred represents the ease with which people succumb to oppressive states; where she could potentially act and resist, Offred instead accepts “the misogyny of the contemporary United States ... as ordinary and usual” (Stillman and Johnson 78). Her acceptance of the misogyny in the contemporary United States is then “mirrored by her gradual succumbing to the conditions of Gilead” where “[i]nstead of fighting this dehumanization through active resistance ... Offred falls back on her romanticism” (78).

In this way, Stillman and Johnson argue that the text “demonstrate[s] the need for sustained political, feminist consciousness and activity among women by exploring what may happen in their absence” (70). Stillman and Johnson posit that Offred is “the post-feminist who assumes rather than fights for improvements in the treatment of women,” which is then contrasted against her mother who is the “feminist” actively fighting and protesting for the freedom of women (83). Their understanding of postfeminism means that Offred becomes a warning to other women as to what could happen if they do not remain hypervigilant and continue fighting for their rights. In the late 1980s, this reading becomes particularly relevant as discussions about women’s rights returned to the forefront of society. Stillman and Johnson focus on the dangers of Offred consistently remaining inactive when it came to fighting for women’s rights. In pre-Gilead, this was evident in the way she perceived her relationship with Luke as equal, despite Moira’s explanation otherwise, and the way in which she chose not to participate in the protests that her mother was a part of. According to Stillman and Johnson, in Gilead, Offred’s inactivity, translates into futility and complicity. For instance, they argue that

Offred also fails to maintain her identity ... because in Gilead even apparent forms of resistance or attempts to create, maintain, or grasp an identity frequently turn into complicity with the regime. Individuals become unindicted coconspirators in their own oppression. (75)

They highlight how Offred’s use of language ultimately “leads to no action” and instead “may seduce her into depoliticizing the implicit issue and into inaction” (75). As such, where Offred seems to be resisting in Gilead, she only plays into what Gilead wants of her. This becomes evident, Stillman and Johnson argue, in the way her memories of the past begin to fade away over her time in Gilead. Similarly, her complicity is demonstrated by which risks she is willing to partake in: she chooses to risk all the “illegalities that could bring about her downfall” with Nick, but “rejects the anti-Gilead illegalities proposed by Ofglen” (74). Arguably, when it comes to female comradery, Offred “cannot avail herself of the strengths that could flow from (dangerous) friendship and commitment” (74). Despite her attempts to distinguish a distinct sense of self, she ultimately “fails to maintain her identity” (74). Stillman and Johnson conclude that “Atwood shows her readers ... the world we live in requires our questions and our

feelings, our thoughtful judgments, and our actions” (83). Offred is a warning of what could happen when women stop actively fighting for their rights; Offred’s failure to resist results in her inadvertent complicity.

Under Gilead’s authoritarian rule, female resistance hinges on individual survival; to succeed, women must take action that solely benefits them, sometimes even at the expense of other women. The idea of resistance and complicity going hand-in-hand is what I aim to explore in my thesis: what is the value of Offred’s decision to resist when she does? Where Stillman and Johnson view Offred’s inactivity as evidence of her complicity and role in her own oppression, I further complicate the reading by demonstrating how, within the constraints of Gilead, Offred is also resisting and that it is important to acknowledge her resistance. Moreover, I examine how her complicity plays a necessary part not only in her survival but also in her ability to find spaces to subvert power dynamics and assert her subjectivity. I argue that it is important to see that the contradiction in Offred’s resistance is a mark of an authoritarian understanding of freedom and autonomy; Gilead magnifies the mindset of hyper-individualization that was evident in pre-Gilead—the only way Offred can survive and resist is to capitalize on her body and fight solely for her survival. Stillman and Johnson’s understanding of postfeminism suggests that Offred’s resistance fails because she must do it on her own, only for herself. Yet, Offred proves otherwise with her eventual escape from Gilead and the overthrowing of Gilead in the future. Offred’s play with language may seem ineffective, but it also allows her to discern the truth on her own terms; for instance, Offred develops her ideas of freedom and resistance using her memories of Moira and her mother. I diverge from Stillman and Johnson’s reading of Offred by contending that Offred is not necessarily ignoring the situation she is in; in fact, I argue that Offred’s awareness of her own complicity places her in a particularly grey area that intentionally blurs the line between resistance and complicity and allows her to navigate her precarious situation without risking her life. It is this method that allows Offred to survive Gilead (something that her mother and, later, Moira, are unable to do). Her story, and her recollection of women’s stories in Gilead, allow her to protest against Gilead by recalling womanhood and female existence. My work strives to determine what constitutes

resistance and complicity and what the value of individual survival is in a system where there is seemingly no other alternative.

Tara Brabazon examines the cultural significance of *The Handmaid's Tale* during the Trump era. Although she considers *The Handmaid's Tale* as a novel that comments on the Reagan era in 1985 as well as a TV show that examines current politics, her analysis of culture and feminism illustrates how the novel can be read today. Brabazon argues that “[b]ecause of the television series, the book has been released from the suffocating grip of literary critiques that require ‘quality’ and earnest restatements of historical determinations of cultural value” (150). She contends that as a television series, *The Handmaid's Tale* “can be a part of breathing popular culture... It can be political. It can transcend genre. ... it can create discomfort” (150). Despite the novel’s transition into mainstream television culture, Brabazon emphasizes the cultural impact of the novel itself. She highlights how dystopia in the late 1980s was imminent, and how “over three decades, the dystopia has moved from unthinkably distanced from any possible reality to a legitimate warning and fear of the budding intolerance and misogyny emerging in daily life” (149). Brabazon points out that in the aftermath of Reagan’s America, after the Global Financial Crisis, “neoliberalism failed, publicly and starkly. Therefore, new enemies to justify inequality needed to be summoned” (151). In 1984, the threat of a theocratic dystopia became a reality when Reagan shook the hand of Jerry Falwell, the leader of the New Christian Right; Gilead is the not-so-far-fetched possibility of what this dystopia could look like. I build on Brabazon’s reading of the novel by arguing that Gilead is also the not-so-far-fetched description of what America looks like now after yet another political shift post-Trump.

The parallels between the political landscape in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the frenzy that arose with Trump winning the elections in 2016 are abundant. Brabazon locates the TV series (which also went into production during that year) as a part of a cultural shift where “culture becomes popular culture and text becomes context. ... where popular memory disconnects from one frame and rehooks into another” (152). In the case of the TV series, *The Handmaid's Tale* not only draws current issues into its story, “from religious fanaticism, hypocrisy of political leadership, repression of lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities” to the rise of conservative populism, particularly from

women,” the narrative was also used as a symbol of resistance (152). In March 2017, women adorned in the Handmaids’ outfit, “dressed in red with white bonnets, protested abortion restriction bills in Texas” (154). Similarly, “[d]uring the Women’s Marches in 2017 and 2018, thousands of women dressed as Handmaids” (154). Yet, although the “television iteration is tougher, nastier, more explicit, and more violently ruthless than the book,” Brabazon also acknowledges that both the novel and TV series examine “the impact of misogyny, the cost and consequences of a systematic, brutalising undermining and unravelling of the feminine” (150). Whereas Brabazon examines the television series in a modern context, I return to the novel to view the origin point of Gilead’s creation and how it can be read today. I argue that reading the novel in a modern context allows for a deeper understanding of the trickling effect of Reagan’s era into the political era of today; *The Handmaid’s Tale* predicted what would happen in the year 2195, and its cyclical return to this point of dystopia (first in 1985 when Atwood first recognized it, and now in 2023 with the re-emergence of anti-abortion laws) only emphasizes the consequences that befall the female body.

With Trump’s inauguration, what became evident in 2016 and 2017 is the prevalence of misogyny in the United States. For the first time, “the majority of the voting public in the US voted for a misogynist to be president ... This misogyny was not hidden. ... It was in plain sight” (Brabazon 153). All of a sudden, the parallels with *The Handmaid’s Tale* did not seem so far-fetched; the novel provided an eerily similar backdrop to Trump’s political platform which implied “the rights of women are not important” and that “[c]laiming sex—claiming a woman’s vagina—is the right of men” (153). Although Gilead was created as a warning against “the odd jigsaw of sex, abortion, rape, and hypocrisy in the mid-1980s,” during a time where the New Christian Right was advocating for “traditional marriage,” and Ronald Reagan was making alliances with Fundamental Christian groups, it “moved from unthinkably distanced from any possible reality to a legitimate warning and fear of the budding intolerance and misogyny emerging in daily life” (Brabazon 148-49). The realities of such a future came to life in 2017 when Trump, “a brazen misogynist,” became president (Chira 72); what Atwood predicted could potentially develop in the aftermath of Reagan’s presidency, cycled and recycled itself into the present: “[Trump’s] sexual swagger, stream of insults about

women's looks, and infamous taped boast of forcing himself on women shattered every political taboo that decades of feminism had labored to put in place" (Chira 72). Echoing similar dialogues in the late 1980s, conversations around anti-abortion re-emerged; traditionalist beliefs propagated by the mantra, "Make America Great Again," increased hostility towards immigrants, people of colour, and women.

During Reagan's era, female anti-abortionists, advocates of the traditional female role—women such as Phyllis Schlafly, Anita Bryant, and Tammy Faye Bakker—presented a complicated question about why women would support their own oppression. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena Joy is an example of what could become of a woman who has, as Atwood aptly phrases it, "been taken at her word" (Atwood 56). Similarly, a wave of female Trump supporters also fought for their agendas even if it were at the expense of the female population. Susan Chira claims: "A truism of political science is that party affiliation drives voting, far more than gender" (80). She lists women such as "conservative Christians like Krysta Fitch, who believed the Bible made men the head of the households" amongst others who fall into a contradictory space of being both complicit in pushing anti-feminist agendas while also being women themselves (80). Chira continues by stating that

It depends on which identities—woman, wife, mother, race, class, political, or religious affiliation—are more central for which woman. Just as Phyllis Schlafly rallied conservative women against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s by defending motherhood and homemaking, political scientists have found that many conservative women tend to define their power and privilege through the men in their lives. (81)

What Chira points out in her article is the complex relationships between identity, subjectivity, and power. That is to say, identity and subjectivity play a significant role in creating the perception of power, and that this perception of power may be one explanation as to why certain women choose to affiliate themselves with men and people in power at the expense of other women. As is seen through figures such as Krysta Fitch, Anita Bryant, Tammy Faye Bakker, or Phyllis Schlafly, complicity and the perception of power go hand in hand. Reading Serena Joy in today's context is all the more important because it gives insight into how circumstance can influence interpretations of resistance.

In her reading, Brabazon considers another phenomenon, which she calls ‘neutralisation,’ where people, arguably like Offred, easily adapt to horrific circumstances. She argues that “[r]eligion is a strong technique of neutralisation. Irrational and illogical behaviours become neutralised through community engagement and repetition” (Brabazon 149). Gilead utilizes the tactic of neutralisation to “normalise particular languages and behaviours” that would otherwise be challenged (149). The concept of neutralisation may demonstrate the ways in which Offred and Moira rationalize their reasons for conceding to Gilead’s rule; in the face of a system that works to brainwash the population into internalizing ideologies through violence, neutralisation adds another dimension to complicity. That is to say, what constitutes complicity must be placed under question; what can be considered as resistance may also be more complicated than what meets the eye. What may not necessarily seem like resistance, such as Offred’s inactivity, or Moira’s eventual succumbing to Jezebel’s, can also be read as spaces for them to safely reinstate their agency, subjectivity and identity. Similarly, it is also important to ask what the extent of Serena’s complicity and resistance is now that she is a part of Gilead. Where the term freedom is used as a tool to reinforce a system of oppression, this thesis works to determine what constitutes resistance and how empowerment should be defined for Offred and Moira. This thesis considers the value of Serena Joy’s actions, as problematic as they are, as well as those of Offred, and Moira, to demonstrate how resistance, complicity, identity, and power are interconnected.

If resistance, complicity, and power all intersect, the debate surrounding whether or not Offred is a figure of feminist resistance becomes all the more confusing. On the one hand, Offred as a figure of resistance or complicity doesn’t really matter because the political commentary in the background overrides any decision she makes. On the other hand, Offred’s seeking the smallest opportunity that she uses to enact forms of resistance allows her to change the course of her own journey. This thesis examines what it means to resist, to be complicit, and how the illusion of power can trap women in a cycle of oppression. Moreover, it evaluates the ways in which womanhood is defined, and whether Offred, Serena, and Moira can be considered feminists. In her analysis of the monstrous feminine, Brabazon questions the portrayal of womanhood:

How are women to understand their lives? More precisely, how are they meant to understand how and why the feminine is systematically marginalised, demeaned, refused, decentred, and ignored? Creed's monstrous feminine – as a theory, concept, and trope – captures the fear and disgust in men that women's bodies summon. These bodies leak. They grow other humans. They stand for difference. They stand for an alternative to the phallic punctuation of culture. The rise of the alt-right – and yes, that verb was intentional – with the attendant retraction to heteronormative, procreative femininity creates new challenges and opportunities for feminism. In response, we must hope for a tough feminism that does not shirk or shrink for the fear, the abuse, the repulsion, and the disgust. (156)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is this very idea of "tough feminism" that is challenged when the line between resistance and complicity is blurred. Gilead's treatment of women only magnifies "the monstrous feminine" as it reveals an underlying fear of the female body. Brabazon advocates for a "tough feminism" that "does not shirk or shrink for the fear, the abuse, the repulsion, and the disgust"; however, I argue that the complicated, subtle acts of resistance are just as important and just as tough (156). Atwood's novel may be a warning as to what can happen to women if we stop actively fighting, but it also highlights an important feature of female resistance in that women will not disappear.

Offred's recollection of her time in Gilead is not only her story but a story of spaces. Embodying these sites of absences (which I will later, using Adela Licona's understanding of the term, call a "third-space") becomes a form of resistance against the larger system. I argue that Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy may not be "tough feminists" within Gilead but still remain feminist figures despite their complicity with the state.

The feminine juts and jars. It has edges. It cuts. It is implicated in patriarchy. It is required by misogyny to add repulsion to the injustice. There is no clean feminism, just as there is no impenetrable patriarchy. Complicity may reinforce already existing power. It may also offer a pathway through repressive patriarchy until a resistive option presents itself. Offred's 'resistance' to Gilead is clear, if small and tenuous: 'I will not be the girl in the box'. Feminists may want her to be the woman on the barricades or swinging from the multiple ropes drawn by hangmen. Sometimes summoning desire, hope, identity, and consciousness from

hopelessness is enough. Sometimes summoning a future when there is none is the resistive act. Feminism rarely presents clean and crisp victories. (Brabazon 154)

As *others* in a state where gender hierarchies are exacerbated and “[t]he productive vagina is all that is of value” (Brabazon 151), Offred, Moira and Serena Joy sometimes choose to oppress other women as a way of gaining limited control over their bodies. Reintegrating their identity, subjectivity, and agency is enough to be regarded as an act of resistance because it resists the system where “the woman is discarded” (151). Offred’s recollection of her time, and of women’s time, in Gilead allows her to counteract the erasure of female bodies in history; this is her-story, within the space of absence that women are forced to fill. Brabazon concludes her analysis of the novel by claiming that “[t]hrough an academic intervention, the burning cruelty and relentlessness of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is released. It is in the past. Resistance did triumph” (156). Arguably, where Brabazon sees a circle of release from oppression, the academic conference at the end of the novel also presents the reality of history repeating itself (albeit to a lesser extent). The male Gileadean Studies Professors’ misinterpretation and overriding of Offred’s story with their own voices and opinions reveals the re-establishment of an old cycle of oppression. Gilead may have been overthrown, but the system prevails: women will continue to be marginalized from their own stories. Freedom remains illusory.

The importance of freedom being illusory is that it coincides with the portrayal of resistance, complicity, and power. Heather Latimer’s article on reproductive rights in *The Handmaid’s Tale* examines how language influences not only the perception of reproductive rights but also understanding of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’. Latimer defines reproductive politics “as the struggle over who has the power over women’s fertility” which is often “focused on the topic of abortion” (212). Although the article delves into the ways the lack of the term ‘abortion’ is evident in the films *Juno* and *Knocked Up* compared to its use in the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I would like to focus on Latimer’s analysis of circular logic in reproductive politics. By “stretching” conversations on reproductive politics in the 1980s, the novel demonstrates “how reproductive laws based on ideas of ‘privacy’, ‘freedom’, and ‘choice’ can become circular” and how this can lead to rights being stripped away from, instead of being granted to, individuals, especially women (214). Orienting readers to the debate on abortion rights and reproduction during

the Reagan era, Latimer demonstrates how the novel interrogates the backlash of the anti-abortion movement in the 1980s after the passing of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973:

The debate, both inside and outside the US, soon became framed within the parameters of this dichotomy: the woman's 'choice' vs. the foetus's life; the woman's 'privacy' vs. the foetus's vulnerability; the woman's reproductive 'freedom' vs. the foetus's freedom to live. (215)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is this very dialogue about reproductive freedom and use of certain ambiguous terminologies that are investigated. Latimer shows how "Offred is keenly aware of ... the fact that she is responsible for becoming pregnant even though she is in control neither 'of the process', nor of 'the product' of her surrogacy arrangement" (219). Offred highlights her awareness of the paradox that is evident in politically charged words such as 'freedom' and 'choice' when she points out the lack of real choice that she has: "There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (Atwood 105). Being a handmaid is presented to her as a "choice," but she is aware that the alternative (becoming an unwoman, or death) is no real choice at all. Similarly, she is aware that choosing to become a handmaid meant signing away her choices. Freedom, survival, and choice become terms that exclude the female body. She recognizes that in her circumstances, power, like choice, like freedom, is only "an illusion" (90). As such, what Latimer highlights is how "even though legal reforms have political value, they do not alter the underlying cultural gender ideologies that continue to inform the law itself" (221). Taking Latimer's analysis, I expand on the effect and influence of language in terms of defining Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy as feminists. I demonstrate how terms such as resistance, power, and complicity are not only inherently ambiguous but are also dependent on each other; where Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy may reinforce a cycle of oppression, the ambiguity of these terminologies also offers them room to enact forms of resistance and obtain moments of power within their states of oppression. My thesis responds to the circular nature of reproductive politics and patriarchy to examine how women are able to use and subvert these spaces to their own benefit. If, as Latimer contends, "[t]he novel not only reveals the possible failings of legal systems built on patriarchy" but also "exposes how laws produce and keeps intact particular forms and practices of life, and particular formations and relations of power,"

then it is this very failing that also provides women the opportunity to re-establish their identities and reclaim space (221). As such, my thesis uses Latimer's analysis as a framework to demonstrate how Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy tackle the trap of freedom and choice as it is presented in Gilead.

In Atwood's novel, Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy have to seek small, sometimes illusory modes of resistance in order to reject, exploit, and survive Gilead. Where Gilead restricts women to strict rules, limited spaces, and imposes specific roles and identities on them, women resist by retaining their individual identities in their minds. Of course, the internalized self-enhancement occurs to a different extent in Gilead, but the ultimate result is the same. By this I mean that ultimately Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy's resistance occurs through psychological processes where they are able to reclaim spaces that are taken away from them in order to achieve even the most fleeting and possibly fruitless sense of power. Where Offred's attempt at reconciling her past and present may seem like a form of stagnation, under the feminist lens her decisions become much more active and valuable. Similarly, Serena Joy's, exploitation of other women becomes much more complicated when considering how it benefits her individually. Serena's complicity is a way for her to develop and enhance her position, her identity, and survive the regime as a woman. As a Wife, Serena has some status, though less than when she was the spokeswoman for Evangelical politics (pre-Gilead).

Exploiting her position as Wife can be read as an attempt for Serena to resist her oppression and to maintain an illusion of the power that she had before. Each woman has to advocate for her own individual survival, which inadvertently coincides with Gilead's tactics of keeping the women isolated from each other. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a narrative that transgresses time; it is relevant both in the past and now in the present as we see the slow collapse and regression of the United States in the aftermath of Trump's regime. The degradation of female rights with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is just one example of how relevant *The Handmaid's Tale* is today. In a nation such as Gilead where women have no freedom, reinstating their identity and subjectivity is vital, and yet, the only way to resist, contradictorily, reproduces the same system. I will define female power as the ability to assert subjectivity and identity, even at the expense of other women. I will consider the ways in which Offred, Serena Joy, Moira, and Aunt Lydia

resist the system, as well as the implications of their resistance. Moreover, I will focus on the ways in which storytelling, subversion of gaze and identity, and violence allows women to reiterate their agency in states of oppression, and how the context of these forms of resistance influences feminist progress.

Atwood and Feminism

Many of Atwood's works fit into the second "wave" of feminism. Her narratives, especially her earlier works, explore themes of the initial development of the second wave of feminism as it challenged the identity of womanhood and women's places outside of the domestic realm. For Atwood, her novels are reflections of real-world issues that she has witnessed and experienced; she argues that "the feminist label is only applicable to those writers who were consciously working within the parameters of the feminist movement" (Tolan 9). By distinguishing her writing based on her own activism, she emphasizes how her fiction is not written with the intent to change the world or to take an active political stance; instead, it works to reveal what is currently occurring in the world. Atwood goes on to argue that her work depicts what it means to be human: "What's important to me is how human beings ought to live and behave. ... If people end up behaving in anti-human ways, their ideology will not redeem them" (*Waltzing Again* 35). As works of fiction, her novels have the flexibility to be analyzed under a variety of intersecting genres and may be one of the many reasons her texts are relevant today. Whether or not Atwood agrees, the themes in her novels create a vital space to examine and explore the political climate of the world during her time and even now, as is evident with *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Examining the issues of second-wave feminism, *The Edible Woman* is a novel that converses with issues of female identity, independence, and consumerism during the 1960s.⁴ I bring this novel into conversation because it demonstrates how Atwood interacts with feminist themes in her novels. Atwood explains that she was influenced by feminist texts like *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan and *The Second Sex* by

⁴ *The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 and published in 1969.

Simone De Beauvoir while writing *The Edible Woman*. The influence of such feminist texts is evident through Marian's sense of self, her protest of the patriarchy through anorexia, and her relationships with Len, Peter, and Duncan. Like most of her novels, the narrative of *The Edible Woman* is timely in that it comments on the "neo-Freudian conservative revolution that was intimately related to the rise of consumer culture and the corresponding emergence of what Friedan termed 'The Happy Housewife Heroine', who was the 1950s and 1960s counterpart to the Victorian Angel in the House" (Tolan 26). Marian's character challenges and examines the disparity between what was being marketed to the female and male consumer. Moreover, she parodies the impossibility of consolidating a female identity apart from a male counterpart. Atwood draws on de Beauvoir's argument that "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir 15). Rather, woman, according to de Beauvoir, "is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 16). As the inessential object, Marian's identity is a reaction to her various circumstances; her womanhood is defined by market tactics, propagated by the men and women around her, that Marian is exposed to throughout the narrative. Moreover, Marian's own incompatibility with her identity refers to de Beauvoir's concept of how the two sexes are divided. De Beauvoir argues that the sexes are divided in such a manner that women are simultaneously dependent on the existence of men while also being entirely othered by it. Women "have no past, no history, no religion of their own ... They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women" (de Beauvoir 18). Marian's journey challenges the social conventions of what it means to be a woman and the impossibility of transcending the physical body to resist the social impositions enforced upon her sex. Her relationship with Peter exacerbates the confinement of her identity, as well as her dependency on a man because of the socioeconomic comfort and status that marriage presents, as well as the impossibility of her ever being able to free herself from the capitalist constraints that pervade all aspects of her life. Having her consume the cake at the end recycles and, arguably, undermines her attempt at liberation

from these constraints as it shows how ultimately the system wins; to survive, Marian realizes that there is no other alternative than succumbing to her reality.

Significantly, Atwood focuses on a white, middle-class demographic in the novel. *The Edible Woman* depicts Marian's personal understanding of a social and political self during a time where market climates not only determine what a woman is, but also deprive women of her "essential self" (Tolan 11). *The Handmaid's Tale* follows a similar trajectory, confining its narratives to the perspective of a white middle-class female and her understanding of the world. I bring this topic into consideration because it is important to note that under the feminist lens, Atwood's novels verge dangerously close to "hegemonic feminism," a term that refers to a very specific version of feminism which "is white-led, marginalizes the activism and worldviews of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression" (Thompson 39). In *The Edible Woman*, hegemonic feminism becomes particularly prevalent as the narrative follows the indignation and resistance of a white, middle-class woman in the United States against the patriarchy and the limitations that are imposed specifically on her and women like her. Marian's battle is against her role as a woman in the domestic sphere of the white, suburban middle-class. Consequently, the feminist battles of other women are neglected by the narrative. In the same vein, *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on Offred's perspective, as a woman from the middle-class surviving the authoritarian regime of Gilead. To counter the scrutiny of her depictions of feminism, Atwood explains that her works explore human identity: "What's important to me is how human beings ought to live and behave" (*Waltzing Again* 35). As such, the feminist themes that arise in her narratives are the results of her speculation of real-life political and social systems. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood tackles the pervasive and complex relationship between capitalism and its effect on female identity. By limiting the narrative to Marian's perspective, the novel does not appropriate any other culture, but rather, only focuses on her individual experience. However, as Atwood broadens her depiction of feminist experiences—from the hegemonic feminism in *The Edible Woman* to the amalgamation of feminist experiences from various cultures as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*—the more problematic the lack of diversity in her novels become. I want to clarify that I am not supporting Atwood's decision to write a novel without any people of colour in it. As will

be further explained, one of my own personal anxieties surrounding her works is their neglect of race. I am arguing that *The Handmaid's Tale* faces a more complex scrutiny because of its appropriation of slave culture and Islamic oppressive regimes in Gilead.

The influence of various cultures in Gilead's regime are evident; Noah Berlatsky analyses how "Offred's experiences of violence and sexual coercion are based on American slavery" and the uniforms that "[t]he handmaids are forced to wear" are "outfits that mix nun's habits and burqas" (Berlatsky). Not only do Offred and the handmaids undergo a series of sexual enslavements that mirror the experiences of black female slaves in America, Atwood also goes so far as to use the lyrics to "Amazing Grace" which Offred sings to herself as a small form of protest against Gilead; the song "was originally written as a protest against the slave trade" (Berlatsky).⁵ The novel is narrated from the perspective of a white woman and seems to explicitly target a specific demographic of white women in America: "In her world, independent Western women have fallen into an Orientalist nightmare. The terrible thing about being a handmaid is that you cease to be white" (Berlatsky). This is not a surprising narrative choice that Atwood makes in her novel; in fact, few of her novels include a widely diverse cast. Atwood has tweeted that: "Only 'race' is the human race, sez me. (And sez science.)" in response to a question about her Jewish background, once again taking a deliberately neutral stance on the topic altogether (@MargaretAtwood twitter.com). When referring to *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood explicitly states that: "I didn't invent anything, I didn't add anything new in, I took things that are really happening now" (Terkel 20:56). To make this claim and then neglect race altogether, therefore, produces a question as to how Atwood defines who is part of the present and past in North America. Ana Cottle points out the implication of Atwood's stance: "*The Handmaid's Tale's* warning to white women is thus clear: beware, lest that which was already done to other women, be done to you" (Cottle). In other words, Atwood's novel is a warning to white people of the

⁵ Atwood has appropriated a lot of elements from Black history, including her quick acknowledgement of "black denizens — who are referred to as "Children of Ham," a reference to the Biblical Curse of Ham that some religions have used to justify slavery — are sent to re-settle in a place known as "National Homeland One." (Cottle)

worst-case scenario and a reminder that they are not invulnerable to this kind of oppression.

An argument used to counter the accusations of racism in the novel is that race is not the central issue in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In fact, Hulu's TV show attempts to rectify the lack of diversity by including people of colour in its cast, arguing: "that this [Gilead's] future world would be mostly post-racial, because evangelical Christianity has become "a little more diverse" since the book debuted in 1985, and because fertility is the focus of Gilead's theocracy" (Cottle). The show's producers have faced a lot of backlash for this claim and, admittedly, their words provoke a more problematic internalization of racism that should be considered.⁶ To view the novel as a template for white women and men, as Atwood implies it might be, in order for them to empathize with and understand the plight of what other races have undergone inherently contradicts her ideology of there being one "human race" (@MargaretAtwood). Furthermore, claiming that in the world of Gilead, the increase in infertility has moved the nation to a post-racial world also raises a lot of concern about the way the past and present is viewed. Although it is vital to acknowledge the importance of race (and its absence) in *The Handmaid's Tale*, my essay focuses on how the underlying political influence of neoliberalism impedes female resistance. What Offred goes through as a white woman is also an experience that has already affected many women worldwide as is seen from Atwood's influences of terms and experiences from the Philippines, political situations in Argentina, "Middle Eastern countries" such as Iran, as well as slave experiences in North America (Terkel 19:34). As such, despite the problems of Atwood's generalization and appropriation of global feminist issues in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the generalization can also give a glimpse into how Atwood's understanding of female oppression and resistance can be expanded and

⁶ Refer to Ana Cottle's post on medium.com for more information on the conversation of race in *The Handmaid's Tale*, both the TV show and novel. She discusses how "[t]he book, in effect, appropriates the black female slave experience and applies it to white women — while banishing actual women of color to a place we never see. While it's true that this banishment storyline was meant to serve as commentary on slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy, the fact that this plotline was pushed to the fringes of the narrative, while keeping the focus on the plight of white women specifically, raises concerns" (Cottle). Website URL: <https://medium.com/the-establishment/the-handmaids-tale-a-white-feminist-s-dystopia-80da75a40dc5>.

applied to a larger group of women internationally. It must be noted, I am not claiming that these experiences can and should be generalized; I believe that the lack of diversity in the novel is a major issue. However, what this essay in particular focuses on are the threads that Atwood has woven into many of her novels throughout her writing career: female survival and female resistance through identity and space. Focusing solely on the socio-political nature of Gilead and its effects on female resistance, my essay uses Atwood's amalgamation of various international experiences of oppression to understand the political degradation of Gilead and how Atwood notices and construes the complexity of female victimhood in her novel. The condition for female resistance and victimhood is further complicated when viewing *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopian post-apocalyptic novel.

Although many academics have argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be categorized as a myriad of genres including feminist dystopia, Atwood has refused to define her novel as anything other than as speculative fiction. Undeniably, the Republic of Gilead is a dystopian world set in the near future, with a totalitarian regime that emphasizes the severity of transitioning into an extremist religious state, and the novel critiques neoliberal perceptions of freedom by portraying the effects of maintaining such beliefs. Transforming a utopian dream into a dystopian nightmare, Atwood paints a future where individuals are consumed and shepherded into a new world order where they must sell their agency and identity for the sake of the "greater good." The novel is situated in the aftermath of a global pandemic caused by a climate catastrophe in which fertility rates have dropped to alarming levels. What is interesting, however, is the lack of scholarship on *The Handmaid's Tale* as a post-apocalyptic narrative. Atwood's most recent publication, *The MaddAddam Trilogy* is the work she has written that is most prominently post-apocalyptic. The narrative takes place after the world has been ravaged by a plague, but even this series verges over the line between post-apocalypse and sci-fi dystopia. Admittedly, the global catastrophe in *The Handmaid's Tale* remains in the background of the novel, mentioned only in passing, whereas, as many have argued, the novel foregrounds the issue of infertility and female oppression; however, I argue that the post-apocalypse is a necessary facet to understanding the conditions of female resistance in Atwood's novel.

Extending into a different genre, albeit under the umbrella of speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes what a post-apocalyptic dystopia could potentially look like for women. The ultimate survival for the oppressed female body is through the retention of her individual identity. As I will explain later, viewing *The Handmaid's Tale* as a post-apocalyptic novel broadens the understanding of female bodies in imagined futures. In a world that has been ravaged by pollutants and infertility, the political collapse of the U.S. into The Republic of Gilead is a catastrophic result of facing the potential end of the world. My essay works to consider how imagined futures continue the cycle of oppression and imposition on female bodies for the survival of the world.

Why Post-Apocalypse? Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse, and Dystopian Post-Apocalypses

Historically, the term apocalypse has carried theological undertones, referring to the end of the world, or Judgment Day. The apocalypse was predestined from the very beginning of time and “is intrinsically tied to the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation by John, where prophetic visions, such as the Whore of Babylon or the Beast, lead to the Second Coming of Christ as revelation (Bibb and Simon-Lopez vii). The theological apocalypse was “[t]he idea of the ultimate victory of good over evil and the beginning of the after-life, either in heaven or in hell” but “has become a cultural phenomenon which has already left its initially exclusively religious constraints” (Bibb and Simon-Lopez vii). The term slowly progressed from a divine prophesy into a political and religious tactic to “best direct people—individually and collectively—towards a better life on Earth” (Palmer 3). Building on the religious idea of apocalypse, which determines that the fated end of the world will lead to the afterlife, the apocalypse became a way to “persuade people into action” (Palmer 2). The term was also used as a way to speak “about the fate of the community as a whole” so that “large-scale organisations (the Church, the empire) [could] keep people on the right course” (11). Apocalypse corporealized the unimaginable. It took history and showed us the faults of our way of life, and in this way allowed individuals to desire acting towards moral goodness, towards redemption. The introduction of the term of post-apocalypse, however,

complicated the traditional definition of apocalypse. The post-apocalypse “combine[d] the ideas of Judgment Day, the end of humanity and a collective identity, and [came] up with something new” (Conrad 65). The apocalypse, as such, expanded and encompassed any “extreme social and cultural disjuncture in which dramatic events reshape the relations of many individuals at once to history ... leading people to act in unprecedented ways, outside of their everyday routines” (Hall 3). The significance of the post-apocalypse is that the apocalypse no longer defined a permanent end to the world, but rather became an abstract concept defining the ending of a way of life. As such, “social and cultural disjuncture[s]” could be defined as apocalypses which opened the possibility for the rebirth of a new, imagined world order (Hall 3). What becomes evident is the overlap between post-apocalyptic and dystopian fiction; De Cristofaro highlights how post-apocalyptic fiction “engages with the concerns that give origin to today’s dystopian apocalyptic visions in such a way that the roots of these concerns in traditional apocalyptic logic are exposed” (5). Consequently, post-apocalyptic regimes are often dystopian in nature, exploring the inevitability of old regimes being destroyed and recreated in the future.

The overlap between post-apocalypse and dystopia can be confusing. For a text to be dystopian, it “needs to foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using that setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically that of the author or audience” (Booker 5). Booker acknowledges the blur between post-apocalyptic fiction and dystopian fiction, claiming that “[p]ostapocalyptic fictions can lead to the rise of dystopian regimes, and they can certainly serve as cautionary tales” (5). Both types of narratives imagine potential futures as a way to determine “how and why a ‘modern’ society is not immune from devastating acts of destruction, how it is that ‘modern’ people, and their leaders behave in times of great danger, and whether there are lessons and opportunities one’s society may draw from danger” (Hall 5). Where Booker differentiates between the genres is in how each genre focuses on an imaginary society; according to him, “postapocalyptic texts do not generally focus on the details of the imaginary societies they portray so much as on the collapse of the preexisting society and are not therefore properly dystopian” (5). It is at this point where I pivot from Booker’s claim by considering definitions of modern post-apocalypse and post-apocalyptic

dystopias. Dystopian fiction came into literature as an effect of “the terrors of the twentieth century” and its “foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic” (Moylan xi, xii). Ahmed Al-Aghberi Munir defines “the modern apocalypse” as “something to do with the collapse of a universal order that fails to keep up due to dystopian defects in its nature” (2). Whether this “collapse of a universal order” is a biological, man-made, or ecological disaster, it is a point in time that “envisions an irrevocable point of the future of humanity” and the post-apocalyptic future “is no more than a reflective outcome of the present causes and complications” (12). What Munir’s definition of post-apocalyptic fiction highlights is the ways in which it overlaps with dystopian fiction. A text, in this way, can be both post-apocalyptic and dystopian, as Munir indicates, using Atwood’s novel, *Oryx and Crake* as one example among others. According to Munir, *Oryx and Crake* is a post-apocalyptic and dystopian novel because it “address[es] recent issues associated with biogenetic experimentation by capitalist corporations that lead to the death of the world’ population and the entrapment of survivors” (8). The phrase “recent issues” stands out in Munir’s close-reading, and is something he repeats when defining post-apocalyptic fiction:

Post-apocalyptic fiction necessarily envisions an irrevocable point in the future of humanity. This future, however, is no more than a reflective outcome of the present causes and complications. By addressing a problematic future, colored by the present influences of power relations, authors are actually accentuating critical parts of today. Hence, imagining the future that has never taken place except in text is no more than going a step further in the critique of the present systems governing the world. (12)

In this definition, Munir emphasizes three points that *The Handmaid’s Tale* also checks off: “an envisioning of an irrevocable point in the future of humanity,” which we see through the increase of infertility due to climate change and plagues; “a reflective outcome of the present causes and complications,” which is evident in the ways Atwood parallels religious political regimes in Iran, and incorporates historical religious and political systems in Gilead as it survives the apocalypse; and thirdly, “imagine[s] the future that has never taken place in the text” as a “critique of the present systems governing the world,” which is evident in the portrayal of neoliberal ideals such as what

freedom means for both Gilead, and for the women.⁷ Most importantly, returning to the point about “recent issues,” as a science fiction dystopian novel as Moylan argues in her article, *The Handmaid’s Tale* imagines a future that could be “no more than ‘twenty minutes’ into our own dangerous future” (Moylan 106). Moylan’s statement would be true in 1985, when the novel was published and after the Reagan regime (which Atwood was partially inspired by when composing her novel), and even now in 2022 as the United States undergoes political turmoil, reiterating the circular nature prominent in post-apocalyptic fiction.

The apocalypse in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is much more complex and ominous because of how slowly it takes place. In her book, *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times*, Diletta De Cristofaro contends that “America’s conception of its own history and hegemony is intrinsically apocalyptic” (58). She demonstrates how the myth of a New World, the Puritan history of ‘a city upon a hill’, the Manifest Destiny, and American exceptionalism all build into an image of utopia that is built on “apocalyptic logic” (58). Atwood also portrays Gilead as an extreme extension of such history; Gilead is a compilation of Puritan beliefs and American exceptionalism that continues the trajectory where “the United States self-legitimizes as the culmination of a progressive history” (De Cristofaro 63).⁸ As such, Gilead is both a product of a post-apocalypse and inherently (and presently) a post-apocalypse itself. De Cristofaro’s explanation of a culminative apocalypse represents the same slow movement evident in Gilead’s establishment. The post-apocalypse in *The Handmaid’s Tale* constitutes an end that has taken place in the fictional world of America, resulting in a stasis. Offred’s stillness throughout the narrative, and her hopelessness when it comes to imagining change highlights the effects of the post-apocalyptic situation that she is in. In fact, the post-apocalypse takes place on various levels: globally, nationally, and personally. The narrowness of Offred’s perspective gives readers insight into the personal catastrophe that takes place in Offred’s life, and her

⁸ The name “Gilead” also means “city on a hill,” further denoting the religious and historical cycle of apocalypse.

flashbacks give glimpses into the global and national collapse caused by pollutants and socio-political uproar. For Offred, the change occurs slowly: “Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it” (Atwood *The Handmaid’s Tale* 186). It is not until the new political party freezes the bank accounts of all of the women and implements a law that prohibits women from working does the apocalypse reach its climax. It is only at this point that Offred realizes the extent of the political catastrophe taking place. In fact, after recalling that “[i]t wasn’t the army. It was some other army” that had taken over, Offred first becomes aware of the loss of her individual autonomy and finds herself at a loss. When Luke initiates sex, Offred realizes that “[w]e are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his” (192). Offred’s lack of desire to make love to her husband is an especially significant moment because it is the point of no return. The effects of the apocalypse have reached into the private realm, altering her personal relationships as well as the way of life for the collective population. Her reaction defines the repercussions of a “state failure” in which civilization is forever altered (Manjikian 41); gender rights are divided, and an entire way of life is destroyed and replaced with another one. Offred notes the change in her relationship with Luke when she says: “something had shifted, some balance,” and that she was “his,” thereby losing her identity and subjectivity (Atwood 192). The novel presents a narrow glimpse into a small-scale apocalypse during and after which everything in Offred’s life is slowly taken away from her. As a result, the Republic of Gilead is post-apocalyptic because it changes the way of life for every individual, and results in the recreation of old political regimes in the new world.

The post-apocalyptic world is bleak for two main reasons: one, the devastation that the end of the previous political system has left behind, and two, despite the hope for a better world, repeating what is familiar is human nature. In the face of the collapse of structural power, post-apocalypse brings an opportunity to create new systems where power is distributed in a different manner. However, it is in the post-apocalyptic world where the paradox of free-will, the cycle of life and death, and the nature of power come into play. In the name of survival, new establishments create variations of old power structures, exploiting their position of authority to ensure that there is a future beyond the end of the world. When an authoritarian regime is built in the remains of an apocalypse,

as we see with Gilead, what occurs is a cycle of power that begins as a way to salvage what is left of the nation, and ultimately results in the oppression of its citizens. Within the space of the post-apocalypse, the new institutions that are created rebirth old, violent ideologies and politics that require the exploitation of women to survive. Cementing the patriarchy as the new world order, Gilead rationalizes a new world with an economy based on reproduction. My thesis works to understand how portrayals of women perpetuate or challenge pre-existing institutions. In Offred's life, early in the novel, there is nothing except for the state she is in as a Handmaid; there is no possibility of a different or better future; her resistance in the post-apocalypse is complicated because it takes place after the survival of humankind, it takes place after new institutions are recreated in place of old ones. What we see, viewing the novel as post-apocalyptic, is the inherent victimhood imagined in dystopian post-apocalypse and the complex role of womanhood in the face of the end of the world.

To truly understand the post-apocalypse, it is important to understand its intersectional origin. The end of the world can be dependent on many things other than disease, war, and visitations from outer space. What defines apocalypse can be determined by what has altered a way of life for a collective group of people. Feminism has been a particularly prominent theme throughout post-apocalyptic literature; the post-apocalyptic world offers space to challenge and break perpetuated stereotypes and position female characters outside of misogynist regimes. The post-apocalypse magnifies misogynist beliefs, and in many ways hinders female positions of power. We see the rebuilding of the patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the post-apocalyptic world of Gilead institutes laws that amplify its control over female figures. Women in apocalyptic fiction, specifically, signify "the idea of cyclism or eternal recurrence ... and [are] metaphorically linked with the maternal" (Watkins 128). Although *The Handmaid's Tale* does not directly reveal a catastrophe, pollution caused infertility rates to rise. The background catastrophe works as a way for Atwood's novel to emphasize the political backlash—imitating Thatcher's mantra of there being no other alternative, in order to survive the impending infertility (the apocalypse) that has already happened without the nation realizing it—while also keeping the main issue of reproduction at the

forefront.⁹ The politics of the female body make women a resource by centering on the advantages of their reproductive capabilities. *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a space that considers the repercussions of the patriarchal system after the collapse of the political system; the narrative highlights the circular pattern of female power, political power, and patriarchal control over female bodies. Female resistance, as such, takes on a new form in the post-apocalyptic dystopia that Gilead represents. With no voting rights, bodily autonomy, or financial independence, women are cornered into a state of passivity. To adapt and survive, storytelling, sexuality, and violence become means for women to reassert the identities that have been removed from them.

Motherhood & the Eve-Complex

The definition of motherhood complicates female identity when it is integrated into understandings of womanhood and nationhood. Motherhood, when the state controls it—and what I term the Eve-Complex—is its own separate entity that is used to physically and emotionally anchor women in states of oppression while also ensuring control over the future population. Through reproduction, Gilead takes control of the population by systemically erasing and altering history (through raising and educating the new generation according to what benefits the state). My essay analyzes how the identity of motherhood is divided and conquered by Gilead to become another point of convergence where politics, religion and the market determine, influence, and control women.

Making fertility the sole salvation of Gilead means that the cycle of oppression and patriarchy is not only reproduced in the post-apocalyptic dystopian world, but the identity of womanhood is contingent upon its survival. To be a woman in the post-apocalypse means to be accountable for the survival of the system through the exploitation of reproductive abilities. The ability to birth is not only “an ongoing process necessary to life, but it has also become the name for a political process: the social

⁹ Transcript of Margaret Thatcher’s “Speech to Conservative Trade Unionists” can be accessed online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104171>. Thatcher says: “There is no alternative” on page 4.

reproduction of the worker under capital” (Bellamy 46). The post-apocalypse enforces the process of reproduction by making it an imperative which “ensures repetition by downloading collective responsibility to individuals and especially to women” (Bellamy 46). As such, through the “downloading” of the imperative, institutions mechanize the process of birthing and conflate it with women’s biological identities. Reproduction in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not a choice, it is law; fertile women are condemned to a life of ‘voluntary’ rape as Handmaids to ensure their survival. Wives are domesticated and obligated to raise their adopted children so that they continue Gilead’s legacy. It seems obvious that in order to break the cycle, choosing not to become mothers and protesting against the enforcement of reproduction under Gilead’s rule is the best course of action. Yet, Atwood shines another light on the issue by demonstrating the near impossibility of extricating the self from the belief that having a baby might save these women, both from the threat of sin and from physical damage. My thesis, as such, asks the simple question: how does having children and, on the contrary, choosing not to have children, allow women to resist the system? Motherhood and the resistance against the Eve-Complex stands apart from resistance of other imposed identities that Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy embody because it is not simply about individual survival. Instead, distinguishing between motherhood and the Eve-Complex is a necessity for women to be able to resist higher power structures and to re-establish control over what the future generation will look like. Where Gilead uses fertility to entrap women and continue the cycle of oppression and patriarchy in the post-apocalyptic dystopian world, breaking this cycle entails reclaiming the identity of motherhood.

Using religion, Gilead uses the Christian mother figure who is “unvaryingly sacrificed,” to commemorate the exploitation of female reproductive systems (Joyce 6). Gilead hinges its understanding of women and of reproduction on pain and religious atonement. In the Book of Genesis, God punishes Eve by “mak[ing her] pains in childbearing very severe” and dictating that her husband “will rule over” her (*New International Version: Bible Gateway Passage 3:20*). This is the basis of Gilead, which misuses Christianity as its rationale to oppress and abuse women: “The fallen Eve myth serves as the validation of man’s subjugation of women ... [and] provides the rationale that men must ... control women,” resulting in laws that violate female bodies and

identities (Joyce 13). Eve becomes a cut-out silhouette of all womankind, depicting them as “bad wom[e]n” who must be subjugated to and controlled by their male counterparts.¹⁰ Becoming a mother for Gilead, as such, is an act of holy sacrifice that allows women to anoint themselves with prestige: to be a pregnant Handmaid is equivalent to being “a flag on a hilltop” (Atwood 36); to be a Wife with a child is “a victory” (137). As such, mothers become a symbol of holiness, while the experiences of motherhood are fractured and micro-managed by the state. Religion and authoritarian control over bodies come into play with the empty promise of women being an integral part of the future. Women desire to become mothers because it offers them a semblance—admittedly, one that is tragically fleeting—of power and control over their lives. To be a mother, therefore, means that the woman is an object, and her life is valued, which, in turn, ensures the woman’s individual survival; simultaneously, her fertility also offers her the possibility of being a part of the future. Although biologically, women actively participate in shaping the next generation, Gilead’s intensive law-making and use of religion keeps these women bound to the state and to the men around them. The Handmaids and Wives, for example, have extremely regimented lives where everything is heavily surveilled. The very act of procreating comes with its own set of rules that ensure that Gilead maintain control over the female body and the potential product produced. Similar to the way in which neoliberalism conquers states, motherhood is exploited and used to conquer female bodies in order to ensure a future for Gilead. By permeating into both the public and domestic realms, Gilead blurs the identity of motherhood so that it becomes a process intended for the state, commanded by God.

The issue with motherhood being a biological necessity is that it makes women inevitable accomplices to recreating the system. Griselda Pollock argues that “looking contributes to the way in which the hierarchy of gender is fabricated and maintained” (177). Her analysis of how gaze influences the perception of the female body presents an interesting insight into the ways in which Gilead has established its gender hierarchy. To be a part of Gilead as a woman means to be a sexed object “to be looked at” as a source

¹⁰ It could be argued that the fall of Eve in itself was an apocalypse. The banishment from the Garden of Eden is a form of apocalypse, where both her and Adam are relegated to a new world where they must rebuild a new governing structure.

of pleasure, as a marginalized body that is capitalized for its reproductive capacities, and as a mother of the patriarchy itself (Pollock 177). Inevitably, the women who produce children for Gilead are also ensuring the survival of a system of oppression. Despite this knowledge, women do not resist because they have formed a complex with motherhood in which giving birth and raising a child is simultaneously detrimental to female autonomy and, yet it also beneficial to obtain a sense of purpose and comparative freedom. In this way, the state fractures the identity of womanhood by first merging it with statuses of martyrdom and honour, and then making it a form of religious penance for women. The merging of motherhood with religion and politics fractures the female identity by making motherhood contingent on it. This fracture is further magnified in post-apocalyptic fiction when motherhood is also split into two overlapping roles: reproduction and rearing.

Yet, before continuing, it is important to understand what exactly the women in Gilead are resisting and why I have chosen the term Eve-Complex. The Eve-Complex is a term that I use to define how the state controls the identity of motherhood. I have chosen the term Eve-Complex for two reasons: first, because of the religious connection to Eve as a mother and woman which is evident in the portrayal of the women in Gilead, and second, because “the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden ... can be seen as the first Christian apocalypse” (Sadri 205). In the context of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Original Sin story explains how women and reproduction are perceived and exploited. The foundation of the gender hierarchy formed by God determines that woman is punished comparatively more than man by being given a very “painful labor,” and by being “rule[d] over” by men (*New International Version: Bible Gateway Passage* 3:20). Basing my essay on Carol Gilligan and Lewis Hyde’s readings of Original Sin, I understand the story of the Fall of Man where gender hierarchies and the social construct of patriarchy is born.¹¹ According to Hyde, “[w]hen Adam and Eve cover their genitals, they simultaneously begin to structure consciousness and to structure their primordial community” (169). Eating the fruit ultimately results in the formation of a new

¹¹ Refer to pages 679-682 in Carol Gilligan’s paper “Disrupting the Story: Enter Eve.” Refer to pages 169-172 in Lewis Hyde’s book *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (1998).

“understanding of themselves [Adam and Eve] and their roles in this new societal paradigm” (Sadri 209).¹² In fact, God proclaims to Adam and Eve that “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers,” which demonstrates how the gender hierarchy is established in religion (*New International Version: Bible Gateway Passage 3:20*). This is the same mindset that Gilead follows. Overt gender dynamics are based upon religious precepts; the woman not only “desire[s her] husband” but understands that the husband “will rule over [her]” (*New International Version: Bible Gateway Passage 3:20*). Gilead enforces male control over female bodies by making this control a sign of holiness. To be submissive is to be virtuous. Similarly, allowing their bodies to be used as vessels is “sacred” (Atwood 146). Here, again, through the conflation of religion and identity, motherhood becomes an innate obligation that women must fulfill for Gilead:

I’ll start with the story. You or at least most of you know it—Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden. Actually she’s called “the woman” until they are about to be expelled from the garden, at which point Adam names her *Chava*, or Eve, from the Hebrew word *chaya*, meaning life. Because, the Bible explains, she is the one who will bring forth life; she will be the mother. (Gilligan 678)

Gilligan highlights two important facets of Eve that directly relate to the women of Gilead. First, according to the Book of Genesis, “Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living” (*New International Version: Bible Gateway Passage 3:20*); Gilligan highlights this specific line because it shows how the gender power dynamic begins right after Adam and Eve fall from Eden. Second, it is important that Eve is given her name by a man based on her ability to reproduce and mother. Her existence, and the contingent survival of the human race on Earth, depends on her to give birth and to have a painful birth. This interpretation of Eve demonstrates how the identity

¹² Sadri further complicates the formation of new social roles between man and women by contending that the punishment of Adam and Eve can also be viewed in “its inverse” where the shame of knowledge and sex can also be a celebration, rather than a condemnation, of the human body (Sadri 210). Sadri uses the concept of shame and shamelessness to in the Original Sin to close-read Pullman’s novel, *His Dark Materials*. I use his readings because his explanations on the Original Sin offers a clear understanding as to how the fall of Adam and Eve correlate to the patriarchy and to gender power dynamics. Moreover, his analysis further complicates the image of Eve in YA dystopian novels.

of motherhood is conflated with female identity. The fall of Eve becomes a turning point for the fall of womankind. In the aftermath of her decision, it is Eve who is wholly blamed for her “moral weakness,” perpetuating a gender hierarchy in which man is morally better and unequally punished for her choice. Birth and motherhood, for instance, are experiences for women to atone for their sins (Atwood 161). The complicated nature of the Eve-Complex is that women are given a simultaneous power and punishment (the ability to give birth) for their sins. Their ability to give birth makes them necessary for the salvation of the new world, but they have no say in what this new future could look like. Redefining motherhood on their own terms is a way for them to break the cycle and take back control over their bodies and their futures.

Feminism, Religious Neoliberalism, Authoritarianism, and Space in Context

The political overtones in *The Handmaid's Tale* are no secret: as a dystopian novel, the narrative warns what America could look like in the future as the Republican Party during the 1980s forms alliances with the Evangelical Christian Right, the so-called moral majority. Although neoliberalism “is primarily a secular creation,” Hackworth argues that “it has benefited politically from the prominent rise of the evangelical movement in the United States” (18). He demonstrates how “religious neoliberals scripted a narrative that brought evangelical Christians into the anti-governmental, anti-welfare fold – forming the political coalition undergirding the Republican Party and the neoliberal movement more generally” (3). In 1984, the coalition between politics and religion became an explicit reality when Ronald Reagan shook the hand of Jerry Falwell, the “Fundamental Christian leader of the political group Moral Majority” (Brabazon 148). The effects of such an alliance not only propelled Reagan’s neoliberal agenda but showcased how the New Christian Right created “a theological justification for criticizing various forms of government intervention, whether that be through the protest of ‘activist’ judges or the promotion of political figures who will ‘return America to its Christian roots’” (Hackworth 8). Additionally, Dominionist theology is also “rooted to a neo-Calvinist perspective that is both anti-statist (when it comes to welfare) and highly individualist

when it comes to poverty,” aligning in part with secular neoliberal beliefs (Hackworth 8). These Dominionist theological organizations “within the evangelical fold” are what played a significant role in the formation of the political Right in the U.S. and “focused on unifying Christians against socialism and for neoliberalism” (Hackworth 4).¹³ Similarly, in 2016, Trump’s political victory in the United States depended on rallying Evangelical support: “White evangelical voters were central to Mr. Trump’s first election, and he remains overwhelmingly popular among them” (Homans). Trump even went so far as to vocalize the sentiment of returning America to its Christian roots with his “Make America Great Again” campaign. The repercussions of Trump’s use of religion in politics can be seen to this very day in 2023 with the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. For the purpose of this thesis, I will not be going into greater detail about the history of neoliberalism and Dominionism; however, it is important to note how neoliberal ideals transgress into religious authoritarian states as they are depicted in Gilead. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a direct response to the global shift caused by the reign of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. starting in 1980, but noticing the neoliberal ideals that are pulled into Gilead’s regime also makes room for the novel to be read in a modern context in the aftermath of Trump’s regime.

In Gilead, Atwood explores the possible repercussions of the Republican Party’s decision to merge politics and religion to consolidate absolute power over the state. It is important to note that, first and foremost, Gilead is undeniably an authoritarian state; however, what I would like to consider is the transgression of certain neoliberal ideals that are integrated into this system and its effects on understanding resistance and complicity. Steven Shaviro argues that one of the characteristics of neo-liberalism is hyper-individualism, where every individual must become “their own ‘human capital’” and which also rests at the center of Gilead’s control (10). Of course, the term “capital” may be a bit of a stretch as the novel does not quite delve into the market system of Gilead. The “valued currency of Gilead is children” (Brabazon 151); having children profits the handmaids by allowing them to stay alive, and allows the state to capitalize on their bodies. In this way, each individual is

¹³ In line with Hackworth’s acknowledgement, I would also like to acknowledge that there are various groups and organizations within the Evangelical and Christian community, and that Dominionism focuses on a very narrow and specific sect of Evangelicals who played a part in supporting secular neoliberal politics.

responsible for not only proving their value to Gilead, but they are also responsible for their own resistance. By this I mean that ultimately Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy's resistance occurs through psychological processes where they can reclaim spaces that are taken away from them. This psychological process, in effect, echoes the neoliberal goal of "produc[ing] subjects who are individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing; they are also cast as entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being" (Rottenberg 7). *The Handmaid's Tale*, arguably, critiques this very idea as it emerges in female resistance by demonstrating how neoliberal ideologies systematically embed themselves in culture and in the very identity of womanhood, oftentimes merging into the very definition of feminism. Consequently, neoliberalism complicates spaces of resistance for women. To be able to resist, women must subvert spaces that the system has conquered, including identity and individuality. However, subverting spaces to express individuality aligns with neoliberal beliefs, and thereby propagates the very system they attempt to extricate the self from. Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy face this very conundrum in that their attempts to reinstate their individuality also aid in reproducing Gilead. Where women have become systematically isolated from each other, the only possible form of resistance would be to come together and revolt; the problem lies in the way in which Gilead also isolates women from themselves.

The biggest threat that Gilead faces is the opportunity for women to revolt against the system collectively. To inhibit women from banding together, Gilead uses biopolitical tactics to deprive them of spaces where they can congregate. Gilead's law mirrors the same "interior colonization" (Millet 25) of female bodies that the patriarchy uses to marginalize its women. The state systematically deprives women of spaces where they can express their identities to ensure that women's individual identities are fragmented. Female bodies become sites that impose state-defined identities onto women in order to capitalize on their function and marginalize their existences. Consequently, even the female body cannot offer a "material site where personal identities are actualized" (Merkle 93). One example of Gilead's interior colonization is through the process of renaming women to their function or to their male counterpart. Offred's name in Gilead, for instance, can be understood as "the property 'of Fred'" ... but the name also suggests the similar word 'offered.'" (Horoschak 38-39). The name that Gilead gives her literally

regards her body as an offering that ensures that both the Commander and Gilead can capitalize on her existence (that is to say that they can use her body to produce babies for Gilead). By reducing women's existence to a function, Gilead effectively seeps into every existing space, including private ones where women could potentially resist. Here, Offred's name indicates a forced internalization of Gilead's law: through the neoliberal beliefs that Gilead reproduces, Offred's own identity becomes conflated with the state itself. Her name becomes a tag of sorts that marks her, even when she is alone, as a mechanism for Gilead. As I will discuss later, Offred's interior colonization becomes clear in her inability to recognize her reflection. By imposing a name on her, Gilead ensures that she has no space where she belongs to herself. Defining what constitutes resistance and what is complicity is tricky. For Offred to extricate herself from Gilead, she must find a way to reclaim the space that has been removed from her. Interestingly, the term "space" becomes deliberately flexible in its definition, encompassing both a physical place as well as an abstract location. Among the many definitions, including passage of time, a "[l]inear distance; interval between two or more points," or an "area or extension" of "general or unlimited extent," various forms of space allow women a site of temporary asylum from the oppressive laws that are imposed upon them ("space" *OED*). It is this very flexibility in the definition of space that allows Offred to navigate and embody moments of choice and individuality that Gilead has taken from her.

Chapter 1: Bodies of Silence and Space

Offred

Memory

One of the ways that Offred tries to prevent Gilead from conquering her individuality is by locating her identity in memory and thought. While Gilead dislocates her from her body and name, Offred relocates herself within the present by rationing her identity in the past. It should be noted that Gilead conquers two types of spaces: the physical space of Offred's bedroom, and her body. The biggest threat that Offred faces, and can challenge, is Gilead's progressive control over her mind. Whereas the bedroom and her body can be surveilled and physically controlled (through an enforced uniform and the threat of Eyes), her mind is the only space that is left that Gilead cannot physically enter. For her to be able to distinguish between her private and public selves, however, she must abide by Gilead's ideologies; that means that Offred must submit to Gilead's laws, including being renamed, dressing accordingly, and accepting her status as a Handmaid. For instance, in the physical location of her bedroom, Offred aligns her perception of herself with Gilead's by viewing her body as an object. This is evident in the way she takes inventory of the items around her: "A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. ... A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion" (Atwood 17). In her inventory, what is not considered is Offred's physical presence; among the items around her, her physical presence is so unimportant that it is barely worth mentioning. When Offred does see herself, she sees "a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood," showing how her physical body is a separate and indistinguishable form that does not belong to her (Atwood 19). Immediately, then, Offred switches to describing the red umbrella and umbrella stand. This moment reveals two significant things: first, by using terms such as "distorted shadow," "parody," "some fairytale figure," we see the ways in which Offred, herself, does not recognize her identity or connect it to her physical self. Second, she

further separates herself when she switches suddenly to the description of the umbrella. By refocusing her image onto the objects around her, she further marginalizes her own physical being. In her own perception, her physical body is merely a function of Gilead, like the hat and umbrella stand. Although viewing herself in this manner may seem counterintuitive and passive, it can also be viewed as an active way for Offred to challenge the powers around her. Using Adela Licona's understanding of third-space feminism in non-academic spaces such as zines, I demonstrate how Offred places herself in a "third-space" by creating a border between how Gilead defines her and how she chooses to define herself.

By dislocating herself from her body, Offred forms a (b)orderland where she can maintain an identity that is separate from what Gilead has imposed on her. To keep her individual identity intact, she creates a space between her psyche and the physical geography of her body where she can continue thinking autonomously and individually. Adela Licona uses the terms "(b)orderlands" and "third-space" to show the complex nature of resistance in the modern world. According to Licona, to be in a "third-space" means that the subject is "neither wholly of one side of the other ... not either/or but instead both/and" and that "[t]hird-space lived experiences" reside in a perpetual state of ambiguity that "reflects, informs, and is informed by lived experiences" (Licona 106). Having no other place to challenge authorities, Offred opts to reside in this space of ambiguity where she is both Handmaid and not, both her past self and not. Her mind offers her the ability to decide who to be and how she truly perceives the world. Gilead can control what Offred can say and what she can do, but it cannot change what she thinks and feels. In this space, Offred uses language and thought as tools of resistance to freely emphasize her opinions and desires. Through her thoughts Offred can engage in independent thinking, which explicitly goes against Gilead's reform. Contrasting with the initial marginalization of her body, Offred's internal dialogue allows her to reassert herself. For instance, when she asks, "Why do I want?" Offred intentionally places her presence back into the bedroom (Atwood 17). The word *why* here is important as it reveals Offred's subjectivity. In this case, the very question "[w]hy do I want" allows her to refuse being objectified, and instead, places emphasis on her own individual being. She is not asking what she wants, but rather she is grappling with the complexity of her own

desires as a Handmaid and as the woman who existed before. Here, we see that Offred is navigating the precarious third space between needing to fight against her male oppressor (the Commander) and the general system of Gilead. By creating a separate space for her identity, she subverts her position of oppression by maintaining a level of subjectivity that she otherwise does not have. As such, she challenges Gilead's perception of women and reminds both herself and readers that the human individual Gilead tried to erase, survives.

Similarly, Offred's memories of Luke, Moira, her mother, and her daughter are another way that Offred prevents Gilead from eradicating her identity. Remembering her loved ones allows her to keep her many identities (mother, daughter, wife, friend... etc.) intact, and reduces the level of control that the system has over her. By using memory and thought to passively challenge the laws and systems of Gilead, Offred continuously rejects their attempt at making her internalize the law without risking her life.

Interestingly, the night becomes a space that reveals the limits to Gilead's power.

Although her body is out of her control during the day, the night offers her the ability to leave her situation:

The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. ... I lie, then, inside the room, under the plaster eye in the ceiling, behind the white curtains, between the sheets, neatly as they, and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it. But the night is my time out. Where should I go? (Atwood 47)

The biggest difference evident in Offred's description of the night is her active decision claim the time. Her use of the terms "mine" and her "own time" are particularly significant because she is the owner of this space and of the time within it. She gets to choose where to go, who to be, and what she desires; everything within this space belongs to her individual self. In the context of feminism, calling the night hers allows Offred to partake "in the complex processes of individuation whereby subjects construct their identity, express their agency and actively self-govern in spite of structural/collective barriers" (Genz and Brabon 17). Claiming time is a way for her to covertly violate the rules of Gilead by reclaiming an identity and asserting her subjectivity. Moreover, breaking the rules posits Offred as an, if not inadvertent, active,

political being. I use the term “inadvertent” because of the way that Offred consciously believes she is non-political compared to Moira or her mother. Offred’s own confusion as to her political stance echoes the complexity of her resistance and reiterates the ambiguity of the third-space. She knows that the space she has created for herself places her in an in-between state that is “out of time” (Atwood 47). Describing the night as “out of time” complicates her resistance because it reveals that Offred knows that this space is not real. Violating Gilead’s rules, then, can occur only in this space of no time, outside of reality. In other words, she is an active political being only in her mind and simultaneously a passive, complicit figure in Gilead outside of her mind. Yet, despite the uncertainty of her resistance, Offred’s creation of her third-space is indispensable. Memory becomes an intangible space that Gilead cannot reach because it is quite literally nonexistent. Through her thoughts, Offred can temporarily erase Gilead and counter its power. In this way, Offred discovers a way to save herself without risking her life—her identity transcends the physical body and survives in a conceptual space.

Performativity and Gaze: To Look and To Be Looked At

Offred’s memories may be one way of disrupting her current life in Gilead and, thereby, reducing the state’s control over her; however, in order for her resistance to affect her current reality, Offred must find a way to reclaim the physical space of her body. Through her memories, Offred demonstrates how her thoughts cannot be conquered no matter how much Gilead works to colonize her. She maintains her various identities as a mother, daughter, partner, and friend, and by doing so she is able to retain the complexity of her individualism. Identity becomes much more complicated in the physical realm when the system (and the men around her) impose their own ideas and perceptions of who they want Offred to be onto her body. In order to counteract their control over her, Offred utilizes the third-space to negotiate room for her subjectivity, reinstate her individual identity, and reclaim semblance of control over her body. Forming a third-space consists of using “disruptive discursive strategies” that “prove discursively disobedient to the confines of phallogocentrism and its colonizing effects over time and place” (Licona 106); this often includes using “subversive tactics” in language to rupture “traditional reading, writing, and representational structures and

practices” (106). The extent to Offred’s resistance is tested when she applies “subversive tactics” to expand her third-space into the physical world (106). If she has no real autonomy over her body, role-playing and subverting her narrative allows her to interject moments of subjectivity and challenge Gilead’s authority.

The opportunity for Offred to select which persona to embody is presented to her when the Commander demands that she be his mistress. It is at this point where Offred’s body is split into two opposing personas: one as the Handmaid, and the other as the mistress. The biggest difference from her status as Handmaid is that now Offred has a new space that she can navigate and embody. According to Judith Butler’s theory of power and subjectivity:

As a condition, power precedes the subject. Power loses its appearance of priority, however, when it is wielded by the subject, a situation that gives rise to the reverse perspective that power is the effect of the subject, and that power is what subjects effect. (*The Psychic Life of Power* 13)

Claiming the terminology of mistress is one way that Offred reverses the power between her and the Commander. She knows that the Commander needs her to become the mistress and that putting Offred in this position is also a risk for him; becoming a mistress to the Commander is illegal in Gilead because it contravenes the state’s morals as it works to form an intimate connection between man and woman. Selecting to embody the persona of a mistress in her secret affair with the Commander is a significant moment because she wields some power, thereby subverting—to an extent—the dynamic between her and the Commander, and her and Gilead. The Commander’s “power loses its appearance of priority” because now she can define who this mistress will be; there is an element of flexibility as to where she can place fragments of her own identity back into her body. It should be noted, however, that Offred is only able to play with terminologies and identities after the Commander offers her the position of his mistress. In many ways, it is coincidence that Offred is given a circumstance that inadvertently allows her to exploit the situation to her benefit. The mistress persona becomes a third-space context as it navigates a complex and contradictory state of being that necessitates appeasing the Commander’s desires and playing into a new comparatively smaller level of oppression (being complicit in the underground world of Jezebel’s) in order for Offred to challenge

the larger system. As a third-space context, the persona allows Offred to “resist the delimitations of imposed (discursive) borders and acknowledge the inherent and generative relationships between ambiguous, oppositional, and even contradictory parts” (Licona 106). Offred can reconnect to her body and be an active subject in her world by complicating her sense of self. As such, the identity of mistress gives Offred room to shift the dynamics of power in her relationship with her male oppressor because it is an identity that must remain in a space of greyness, in a state of in-betweenness.

Dressing up in revealing lingerie is a pivotal moment in establishing, or re-establishing, Offred’s identity because it is one of the first time that she consciously chooses to recognize her physical body. Her reflection, and becoming witness to her own reflection, suggests that she is uncovering herself. As she gets ready, Offred initially “want[s] to see [her]self in a mirror” (Atwood 243), indicating a shift in Offred’s resistance to the physical world. Desiring to view her reflection shows that she is taking back room and claiming a presence in Gilead. Unlike her experience with memories which required her to remain within the bounds of her mind, invisible to Gilead, dressing up allows her to determine her body as “a subject” that “reflect[s] on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 21). Whereas Gilead worked hard to cloak her physical being and to entirely desexualize her, standing in the theatrical outfit and in makeup, Offred uncloaks herself. The term “want,” specifically, highlights how Offred returns subjectivity back into her body. By declaring that she wants, she reasserts an individuality that is separate from what is commanded of her. The Commander can already see her; seeking her own reflection means that she is forging a new identity within what the Commander desires—she is looking for something that she desires. It is significant that the Commander is the one who “holds a large silver-backed hand-mirror” for Offred as she applies her makeup (Atwood 243), and that the mirror presumably belongs to Serena Joy. On the one hand, the mirror could be perceived as a way to emphasize the Commander’s control over both Offred and Serena Joy. His holding the mirror physically encircles Offred as well as Serena Joy and locates them in the literal male gaze, within the constraints of what the Commander wants both women to be. When Serena Joy uses the mirror, it is to paint a face that will appease the Commander, which is similar to what Offred is doing now as she becomes his mistress,

as did the Handmaid before her did. The face in the mirror, therefore, represents the male desire. On the other hand, by subverting the narrative when she states that she wants to see herself in the mirror, Offred refocuses who has power within the situation. The very act of him holding the mirror can be viewed as a submission to Offred's womanhood: he is carrying her image, holding her up, reflecting for her what she desires to see herself as, and allowing her to be a woman rather than an object. More importantly, visually, the Commander is positioned behind Offred's face as he holds the mirror for her; his identity, in this moment, is overshadowed by hers. In the mirror, Offred is no longer Offred. She is an amalgamation of various identities, including what the Commander wants of her, and what she wants of herself. The role of the mistress allows her to reside in this contradictory gray space so that her identity can survive in Gilead.

An immediate effect of becoming, and subverting her role as a mistress is that, within the context of her affair, she is able to flip who influences whose actions in her relationship with the Commander. Whereas earlier in the novel, it was the Commander who held a position of total authority, as a mistress, Offred is also able to step into this power and achieve a fleeting moment of equilibrium between the two of them. An example of creating a power reversal between her and the Commander occurs at Jezebel's when Offred makes the Commander wait on her (when he grabs the drinks) and wait for her when she goes to the washroom in the hotel room (Atwood 252, 266). Here, again, Offred's complicity in role-playing as a sex object works as a way to regain a fragment of power. Offred enacts "a reversal" where "power emerges as what belongs exclusively to the subject" and "[a]gency exceeds the power by which it is enabled" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 15). In this scenario, Offred determines the Commander's course of action, and he must oblige because that is what he desires. As a result, her agency exceeds the Commander's authority over her in Jezebel's. Making the Commander wait on and for her is significant because it is a reversal of the power that he once held over her. During Bible readings, the Commander comes "[l]ate as usual," making the rest of the household wait for him before the reading commences (Atwood 92). Similarly, in the house, Offred must go to him, oblige his every demand because he is "the head of the household" (Atwood 91, 147). In Jezebel's, as the mistress, Offred is the one asserting this agency because the third-space of the mistress identity has redefined her role in

Gilead. As a mistress, Offred is privy to the Commander's vulnerabilities which gives her authority she did not have before. Knowing the Commander's innermost fantasies exploits his weakness because Offred can subvert the narrative and make it "feel like [she's] doing him a favour" (Atwood 243). His power over her becomes conditional because she knows that it requires her complicity; he wants her to break the rules with him. Once again, the distinguishing difference is the term "with;" the Commander's desire hinges on a level of equality that he and Offred as a Handmaid do not have. Identifying as a mistress grants Offred the flexibility to perform a role that needs her to assert her subjectivity:

But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He's breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it. Perhaps he's reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely anything you feel like, anything at all. Twice, when he thinks no one is looking, he winks at me. It's a juvenile display, the whole act, and pathetic; but it's something I understand. (248)

In Offred's description of the Commander in Jezebel's, she focuses on the intimacy formed between the two. Highlighting that the Commander "winks" at her emphasizes the way in which her position as mistress brings her into his inner circle. In this scenario, she is not simply an object being shown off, but instead, the Commander views her as part of a relationship that requires her reaction, her engagement, and her tangible presence. The Commander wants Offred to see his identity underneath his function, the same way he desires to see Offred outside of her role in Gilead. It is significant that the Commander is not simply showing her off, but rather, he is "showing off to" her. The word "to," here, is important because it reveals that the Commander sees her as a comparatively equal being within their affair and that his power relies on Offred's reaction. His desire is not simply to use Offred for his own pleasure, but to receive an equal, autonomous response from her. The third-space for the both of them exists in the state of "juvenil[ity]" and fun because it is where their relationship can exist in a state of ambiguity that counters Gilead's laws (248). I digress here slightly to reiterate my point about both creating a third-space context; what Offred's trip to Jezebel's reveals is the

larger, more evasive opponent that every individual in Gilead is fighting. Although my essay does not delve into the male oppression, the Commander's desire to do "absolutely anything [he] feel[s] like," indicates that his identity has also been reduced by the state (248).¹⁴ Offred is not simply battling the Commander—the limit to her resistance reveals just as much when it does not permanently overturn or change her relationship with him— but rather Gilead's control over her body. In the context of feminist resistance, Offred's performativity is a mode of empowerment because it allows her to assert herself as an individual where doing so is prohibited.

In the hotel room, for instance, the sex is different because now it relies on Offred's reciprocation. Where having sex as a Handmaid was much more regimented, in the hotel, Offred knows she cannot get away with her usual tactic of "lying like a dead bird" when having sex with him (267); what he wants is to be turned on and to be able to turn Offred on. In terms of resistance "performative shamelessness may be one of the few options available to young women in the face of intense social and cultural scrutinizing, and often sexually objectifying gazes" (Dobson 144); by obliging the Commander, Offred is able to subvert her objectification into a narrative that requires her agency.¹⁵ Although she has no real choice in the matter, sex in the hotel room can also be an empowering moment for Offred because the Commander must perceive her as an autonomous individual being for him to successfully counter Gilead's authority. Against

¹⁴ Of course, that is not to say that he is in the same level of oppression as Offred or any woman in Gilead is. The Commander is still, without question, an antagonist because of the power he holds in Gilead. As a man, he is the opposition for women. However, in this situation, Offred's resistance becomes more complex because she submits to the lesser of two evils in order to resist and challenge the grander opposition.

¹⁵ Dobson uses the integration of social media and performative laddishness "to highlight the way that as femininity shifts and changes in the neoliberal, post-feminist era, and as representational modes shift via the uptake of social media, so must our understandings of gender 'conformity' and 'subversion'" (Dobson 11-12). Although she focuses on the connection between laddishness and postfeminism, I see a clear connection between the way that Offred uses elements of laddishness to enact her own resistance. Dobson argues that laddish behaviour, including ones that are publicly posted on social media platforms, can work as a method for young women to take control of their self-representation; another way that laddish behaviour can be perceived is as "a pre-emptive strike against the gaze, rather than a purely celebratory, self-pleasing display" (18). In both cases, whether it is a defense mechanism or a way to enact agency, Dobson contends that "the desire for more autonomy in regards to self-definition, can be located here—in performative shamelessness" (18). Offred is doing exactly that, albeit under expansively different circumstances. By subverting her situation as mistress and by indulging in arguably laddish behaviour, Offred is able to return agency back into her body by taking control over her self-representation.

her lack of choice, Offred transfers her third-space into voyeurism because watching is “one thing we [the Handmaids] can really do” (Atwood 99). Once again, Offred utilizes the internal space of her mind, through her gaze, to perceive the Commander on her own terms. On the one hand, creating another internal space of resistance feels like a regression in that she is unable to exert agency in the physical space around her. On the other hand, her gaze and perception play an interesting role in mediating between her internal and external worlds; in this case, using her gaze, Offred can directly strip the Commander of his authority. Outside of his role as the Commander, Offred sees that he is physically disappointing and frail, which is a dramatic change from how she perceives him while he is in uniform. While having sex in the hotel, Offred’s vision works to reduce his physical power: “Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something dried” (Atwood 267). Whereas in uniform, the Commander dominates the room, outside of it, he is reduced in size and marginalized. As such, the Commander’s need for Offred to see him outside of his function also becomes his vulnerability. Her opinions and reactions carry the power to “dismay” and “disappoint” him because forming an intimate connection with Offred depends on him exposing himself to her opinions and reactions (267). His reliance on her gaze forms a space where Offred can enact a reversal of power to objectify and impose her critique onto the Commander’s body.

By subverting the powerlessness of her position and establishing control through her gaze, Offred creates a space of choice where she has the agency to determine whether or not the Commander is able to fulfill his role within their relationship. For instance, earlier in the novel, she compares him, for instance, to a “garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there’s nothing else available,” effectively mirroring the way the Handmaids are perceived (Atwood 98). His body becomes a place that can be evaluated, that the Handmaids and Wives can witness and decide, “he’ll have to do” (Atwood 98). In this way, Offred’s gaze sexualizes him—or, rather, desexualizes him—which strips him of his impenetrable power. His body becomes his vulnerability, a source of weakness that “extrudes, expands, winces, and shrivels back into himself when touched wrongly, grows big again, bulging a little at the tip, travelling forward as if along a leaf, into them, avid for vision” (Atwood 98). Whereas neoliberal ideologies work to monitor “the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating

individuals as entrepreneurial and capital-enhancing actors,” Offred challenges the ideology of being an object for the state when she utilizes her opinions and thoughts to monitor the function of the Commander (Rottenberg 57). Essentially, her perception of the Commander removes the intensive monitoring of her own role and places it onto him; Offred is the one who is monitoring, judging, and determining the Commander’s biological worth within Gilead. Her gaze is equivalent, in the moment and specifically in the room, to Gilead’s surveillance over her body. In this way, Offred is able to reinstate a sense of control within her relationship with the Commander, even if temporarily. Her ability to assert her opinions gives her the illusion of breaking away from the complete eradication of her identity; where Gilead refuses to acknowledge her individuality, her thoughts and perception remind her of the fact that she still exists.

Sexuality:

To further establish her individuality within Gilead, Offred uses her sexuality as a space of resistance to define and redefine who she wants to be outside of her functionality for Gilead. In the patriarchal hierarchy of Gilead, the state determines the parameters of what being a woman constitutes. As a Handmaid, Offred finds herself in the paradoxical position of both being a function of sexuality and also desexualized by the law. By making pleasure “nonnormative,” sexuality and pleasure becomes a space of ambiguity where Offred can piece together a semblance of control (Dean 484). Offred’s sexual presence and agency is seen in her relationship with Nick. Her relationship with Nick transforms into a physical and emotional third-space where Offred can forge a new identity. Initially, Offred and Nick liaise because it is commanded by Serena Joy who wants to increase Offred’s chances of becoming pregnant.¹⁶ However, their relationship truly begins when Offred chooses to continue seeing Nick “[t]ime after time, on my own, without Serena knowing,” and “for [her]self entirely” (Atwood 280). Agency, choice, and pleasure become a vital turning point for their relationship to develop into a space of resistance against Gilead. Unlike with the Commander, her affair with Nick resembles

¹⁶ It is important to consider the implications of Serena’s hand in their matchmaking because it reveals the underlying systemic control of Gilead over their relationship.

more closely the one she had with Luke prior to Gilead. For instance, their kiss in the parlour is not simply an act of defiance against the rules, but also a moment that highlights the equality between them.¹⁷ Offred describes herself and Nick as “mirrors,” implying that they reflect each other in terms of complicity, power, and desire (Atwood 109). This is particularly significant because it embeds a fragment of Offred’s past into the present. Similar to her marriage with Luke, which she defines by the fact that it was built on the both of them “mak[ing their] own decisions” and choosing to be with each other despite the odds stacked against them, her relationship with Nick is also built on risk (Atwood 180). Luke was married before he met Offred and the two of them had an affair before he decided to leave his marriage for her (Atwood 60). Nick has a comparatively luxurious life and status in Gilead, but to be with Offred is to risk his life. In both cases, falling for these men means that Offred risks her reputation and her life; the kiss between them is a mutual roll of the dice hinging on values of reciprocation and consent (180). Therefore, being with Nick becomes a counterspace where Offred can re-enact her previous identity and merge it into the present.

Whereas with the Commander Offred had to subvert her perception to create a narrative where she had a semblance of control, with Nick she has that very agency right at the beginning. Countering traditional gender norms as well as Gilead’s desexualization of her, Offred is able to use the relationship as a place where she can express her sexuality openly. Her openness to her sexuality plays a vital role in rejecting the traditional gender roles imposed on her, and allows her to step, somewhat, into the “ladette” figure: “shameless and celebratory ‘grotesque’ and ‘laddish’ displays ... may be a way for young women to maintain a sense of self-definition by performatively inviting the (masculinized and heterosexualizing) gaze” (Dobson 144).¹⁸ She knows that she has

¹⁷ It is important to note that the kiss between Nick and Offred occur before Serena blackmails Offred into having sex with him. Yet, again, the complex way that Gilead’s hand draws into their relationship demonstrates the pervasive nature of authoritarianism and neoliberalism.

¹⁸ Dobson examines how laddish displays on Social Network Sites (SNS) can be a form of postfeminist and neoliberal feminist empowerment for women against the male gaze and heterosexuality. Although her article does not directly fit into Offred’s behaviour, I argue that Offred does, in fact, fit the “ladette” figure when in context of Gilead’s law. To be with Nick and to be with Nick so passionately and pleasurably is a form of sexual shamelessness and exhibition that Gilead condemns, and as such, her actions can arguably be aligned as a form of feminist resistance.

the power to be the one who “could unbutton,” who could take Nick right then and there simply because she wants to, and she knows that he reciprocates the feeling (Atwood 109). Kissing him in the parlour is a moment of empowerment where she can have him “how [she’d] like to” (Atwood 109). What I highlight here is Offred’s assertion of what she would like. During their interaction, she focuses on what would pleasure her, and what feels pleasurable to her. During her visitations with Nick, Offred actively takes charge: “There is not much talking between us any more, not at this stage. Already I am half out of my clothes” (Atwood 281). With Nick she is allowed to take the lead because she is his counterpart. Her sexual openness with Nick, therefore, can be read “as a symbol of ‘gender change,’ ‘gender convergence’ and young women’s increasing ‘equality’ with men” because it allows Offred to personify a space of traditional masculinity as it is defined in Gilead (Dobson 145). More specifically, because of the equal nature of her relationship with Nick, she can take pleasure from him and can initiate and act upon her desires, thereby blurring, if not reversing the roles between the two of them.

Nick’s room also becomes a physical place for Offred to escape Gilead. She describes his room like “a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside,” which effectively moves her outside of the bounds of Gilead (281). Nick’s place is not fully the past, nor is it fully Gilead; rather, what Nick’s room offers is a space to create a new present that allows her to exert and reconfigure her identity into one that is both past and present. Being with Nick is similar enough to her relationship with Luke that it allows Offred to open up to her vulnerabilities and to consider a future with him. It is at this point that love becomes a significant factor in her perception of her reality. Within the room, Offred is not only sexually liberated, but she is also granted the possibility of falling in love. To fall in love means that Offred can take a political stance against her identity as Handmaid because lovemaking is forbidden. Moreover, falling in love, or becoming a “falling woman” (Atwood 256) allows her to “transcend reality” (Nakamura 5), which connects her to Luke and maintains the illusion of an alternative reality outside of Gilead. It is significant that initially when Nick and Offred kiss, it is before Serena blackmails them; the true foundation of their relationship is outside of Gilead’s influence. Moreover, it is important that in the event of their first kiss, Offred views Nick as Luke, claiming that “[i]t’s you [Luke] here, in another body” (Atwood

110). What these two points demonstrate is that Offred's love for Nick is contingent on her desire for the past. Nick is a placeholder of sorts, or a state of in-betweenness, where she can patch together who she was with who she is: even as a Handmaid, Offred can still be her past self in her own body. Her merging of identities becomes clear when she reveals her real name to Nick: "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (Atwood 282). Offred's dual identity, as both a Handmaid and the woman she used to be before Gilead, is further examined in Rebecca Horoschak's dissertation where she claims:

June's connection with Nick grants her the allowance to be herself, meaning that with Nick she does not have to be Offred. June sharing her name (which, again, is never clearly defined in the book) is evidence of her relationship with Nick being a source of hope for her since she has previously identified her true name as a piece of treasured information (Horoschak 38).

Although I agree that Offred is able to reclaim her identity by giving Nick her name, I would argue further by claiming that it is this very "hope" that Offred feels which reveals the underlying paradox of her resistance. On the one hand, by revealing her name, she manifests the alternative reality and escape necessary for her to survive Gilead. Her name combats her role as Handmaid and reasserts her individuality. By indulging in love, and relocating her name onto her body, she emphasizes her refusal to comply with Gilead and to succumb to her oppression: Nick's room and in the bubble of their romance evades the reaches Gilead's power, and instead, reveals the limit to that very power. On the other hand, it is this very resistance that plays into Gilead's control.

By having a physical space to escape from the world, Offred's motivation to resist starts fading. The implication of Offred's newfound sense of self with Nick is that it can only exist within the constraints of her subordination. When Ofglen offers to save Offred and get her out of Gilead, Offred realizes that she "no longer want[s] to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom" (Atwood 283). The problem with using Nick as a space to recreate her past is that it removes her desire to fight back. This is most evident in the way Luke begins to fade from her mind the longer she pursues her relationship with Nick: "I ought to have done that with Luke, paid more attention, to the details, the moles and scars, the singular creases; I didn't and he's fading. Day by day, night by night he

recedes, and I become more faithless” (281). Her use of the term “faithless” is particularly telling because it demonstrates how she is aware that life with Nick is not equivalent to her life with Luke. Whereas initially, Offred was able to blend her two lives and identities together, her ability to maintain the past is fleeting and illusory. The more she stays with Nick, the more he begins taking up the room that Luke once filled in her mind—this is how Gilead begins to creep into her third-space. While their affair presents them with the opportunity to momentarily seek reprieve from their enforced roles, it also acts as a form of biopolitical control that anchors them to the state:

Telling this, I’m ashamed of myself. But there’s more to it than that. Even now, I can recognize this admission as a kind of boasting. There’s pride in it, because it demonstrates how extreme and therefore justified it was, for me. . . . Some days I was more rational. I did not put it, to myself, in terms of love. I said, I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort. (Atwood 283)

Offred’s rationality underlines the inherent contradiction of her resistance; for her to resist means that she cannot stay in Gilead, and yet, using Nick and her love for him as a form of resistance means that she cannot leave. Here, again, Offred reiterates the distinction between her reality and the third-space she created. Where once her affair with Nick was a way for her to keep Luke with her, with the passage of time, the third-space becomes conflated with her reality. What Offred neglects to consider is that Nick, too, is still a part of Gilead. That is to say that her refuge in Nick’s room cannot actually be an escape from Gilead because it is Gilead. Judith Butler outlines the paradox of power and subjectivity when she says: “As the condition of becoming a subject, subordination implies being in a mandatory submission. . . . ‘I would rather exist in subordination than not exist’ is one formulation of this predicament (where the risk of ‘death’ is also possible)” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 7). The double-edged sword in Offred’s resistance is its inherent acceptance of the system of Gilead. To keep Nick in her life is equivalent to keeping Gilead; her affair no longer rebels against the system because it becomes exactly what Offred desires. Her proclaiming that she wants to start a new family with him in Gilead: “But it’s yours, I say. It will be yours, really. I want it to be,” is problematic because it ultimately fulfills Gilead’s requirement of reproduction (283). Her

new family is an impossibility because if she does get pregnant, she submits to her role as Handmaid and reproduces Gilead's cycle of oppression.

Eve-Complex v. Motherhood

An essential part of Offred's complicity comes from her ability to get pregnant; her relationship with Nick reveals the extent to which the Eve-Complex pits women against their own biological identities. Adrienne Rich contends "that there are "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed upon the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (*Of Woman Born* xv). The former meaning defines motherhood as a relationship in which mother and child mutually and reciprocally form their identity, subjectivity, and autonomy. The experience of motherhood offers women political agency and "can be a powerful impetus to mother's self-development and expression" (*The Impossibility of Motherhood* 208). The latter utilizes the idea of essential motherhood to reproduce the patriarchy. Although the Eve-Complex is very much the latter definition, the problem is that both identities of motherhood are interconnected, which fortifies the hegemony of essential motherhood and the gender-based political and social system. Women fall into the trap of wanting to resist the very system from which terms such as 'womanhood' and 'motherhood' have been created, and unintentionally reproduce the same system that they oppose. By creating a system where procreating is for the greater good of the nation, the very act of becoming a mother becomes political. Offred notices this when she parallels having sex with the Commander to Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter: "*Close your eyes and think of England*" (Atwood 105). By bringing Queen Victoria's advice to mind, Offred reflects on how the process of sex is like the sexual politics of monarchies where sex was used to ensure the future and economic success of the kingdom.¹⁹ Yet, despite this knowledge, Offred cannot help but fall trap to the Eve-Complex not only for her own individual survival, but because it is so deeply embedded within her own identity.

¹⁹ Queen Victoria is a complicated figure as both "hea[d] of the state [and] also of [her] royal household" (Narciso 81), as well as a figure who was antifeminist and claimed "women are not made for governing" (Chernock). Although this essay does not delve into the significance of including Queen Victoria, the similarities and differences between her and Offred are worth considering.

The invasiveness of the Eve-Complex is evident in the way it unifies the Handmaids and Wives in serving the state. Exploiting their maternal instinct, Gilead makes the process of childbirth a communal event that elicits the desire to reproduce and child-rear in women. When Janine gives birth to Warren's family, it is significant that a physiological response is elicited in the Handmaids collectively. Chanting, specifically, becomes a method that aurally unites the women into one unified entity; as she chants, Offred begins to "feel slight pains, in [her] belly, and [her] breasts are heavy," (Atwood 135). Here, Gilead merges the Handmaids emotionally and physically so that they are "no longer single" (135); rather, they are a collective mother, mutually experiencing and connecting with each other on the basis of childbirth. In effect, the state herds women into a maternal frenzy, of a sort, in which their bodies signal to them that becoming mothers is what they desire.²⁰ In the bus, for instance, Offred finds her body reacting to the birth by producing "fake milk" for a baby she does not have (Atwood 137). What becomes difficult to discern is whether the grief the women feel on the bus is because they are separated from their communal baby, or whether they are grieving the defeat of remaining unpregnant (and thereby, risking their individual survival). In either case, the women are placed in a situation where either option aligns with Gilead's agenda.

If the state works to overlap and conflate the identity of motherhood with its own conditions, distinguishing between the two identities is a form of resistance that allows women to extricate themselves from the condition of reproducing. Offred rejects Gilead when she refuses merging the identity of Handmaid with motherhood. Coinciding with her memory as a third-space, Offred uses the space of her mind to discern between what she considers motherhood and what she does not. For instance, she rejects the Eve-Complex by emphasizing that she was only a mother in "former times" (Atwood 57). As such, Offred contrasts motherhood against the Eve-Complex by emphasizing the absence

²⁰ According to a case study conducted by Sapolsky, Barry S., and Dolf Zillmann: "Females who had given birth had more intense excitatory response while witnessing childbirth than others who did not have this experiential background. They also perceived themselves to be more aroused by the events witnessed" (Sapolsky et al. 147). Although their empathy did not necessarily increase for the woman giving childbirth, rather it was "affective reactions" to the sight, this finding suggests that witnessing childbirth can in fact induce a physical reaction. Gilead, as such, preps the female body for its own pregnancy by making witnessing a childbirth (when it does occur) a mandatory event.

of her identity as a mother now. When a Handmaid does give birth, Offred intentionally separates biological mother from the product: Janine's child is not her baby, it is "the baby," and as such, Offred effectively reminds herself and readers that this process of childbirth is entirely state controlled (Atwood 137). Using the pronoun "the" objectifies the baby and emphasizes how it is merely a commodity reinforcing the cycle of Gilead. The baby will belong to no mother; Janine fulfilled her duty, but she did not partake in motherhood.

In her internal narration, Offred highlights the importance of defining motherhood on her own terms. Maternal relationships, whether it be with her own mother or her daughter, become a focal point in her perception of the past and future. By recognizing and learning from her relationship with her mother, and by keeping her daughter present in her mind, Offred, refuses to allow Gilead to disrupt and invade "a genealogy of women" (Feldman-Kołodziejuk 76). Remembering her daughter, for instance, allows Offred to determine her sense of self. It is significant that the daughter is never named in the narrative. In this way, Offred collapses both identities (hers and her daughter's) into one, emphasizing the biological link between them; like her own name, Offred's daughter can only be recalled in secret, away from the eyes of Gilead. Drawing from Luce Irigaray's theory of maternal relationships, Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk argues that "[t]he mother and the daughter always serve as a woman's double – someone she once was and someone she might become" (77). Offred's daughter is not only an extension of Offred, but a potential of what Offred could be. This is evident in the way Offred recalls her daughter as a source of defiance against Gilead. Instead of using pronouns that would allow her to claim her relationship to her daughter (like "my"), Offred uses the terms "a" or "the" to refer to her. Two things are occurring with the use of these terms: firstly, Offred parallels her current situation with her daughter's. Both are without identity, both are without names or claim, and both are disconnected from each other. As such, Offred highlights the incompatibility of motherhood as a Handmaid; without her daughter, Offred is not a mother. By making this claim, Offred is, once again, able to resist Gilead's control over her body and identity by refusing to conflate the Eve-Complex with motherhood. Secondly, Offred's memories of her daughter are tinged by the trauma of the present. Whereas her memories of Luke, Moira, and her mother are a form of escape,

memories of her daughter keep her tethered to a state of loss. As such, her daughter becomes a purgatory, similar to her present, where she lives and relives the trauma of losing her. The significance of this purgatory is that it provides Offred a place to remember the reality of her situation and to refuse submitting to the “new norm” of Gilead. Feldman-Kołodziejuk goes on to argue that Offred “must forsake her maternal role, both past and prospective” in Gilead in order to survive (77); however, I argue that with her memories of her daughter, Offred only forsakes the identity of the Eve-Complex and adamantly maintains what Offred defines as motherhood in her mind. Even after Gilead severs her physical connection to her daughter by separating them, Offred’s memories counteract Gilead’s attempt at eradicating her maternal bond by locating it with her daughter. We see this with the way she asks: “Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind? They must have told her I was dead. ... They would say it would be easier for her to adjust” (Atwood 74). As such, the loss of motherhood as an identity is not simply something that has occurred, but something that is currently occurring. So, although, Offred is being erased from her daughter’s life and the transgenerational bond between the two is being severed, the daughter still presents a defiant truth as to what motherhood should be. Offred is still a mother, but this identity is kept safe only for her daughter. In this way, despite her role as Handmaid, Offred is able to distance herself from Gilead’s law; by distinguishing between her identities as mother and what the Eve-Complex imposes on her, Offred emphasizes the importance of choice. Acknowledging that there is a difference between the Eve-Complex and motherhood allows her to resist the fragmentation of her identity. It should be noted that this perception does not change Offred’s status or the level of oppression; rather, what Offred is indulging in is the only form of resistance that she can access. In her quest to re-configure the identity that Gilead has denied her, she is still vehemently a part of the system and an active part in recreating the system despite her condemnation of it. Yet, discerning between her identities is enough to feel like a significant act against the state.

Violence: Passivity and Pacifism

Blurring the line between her resistance and complicity is physical violence and pacifism. What makes Gilead a dystopian post-apocalyptic regime is its totalitarian

control over its subjects; violence, specifically, plays a large role in enforcing the state's control and ensuring the population's submission to the state. As a political tactic, violence is used as a way to make each individual complicit with the crimes committed of the system itself. The state, then, uses that very complicity to ensure the population's loyalty. The use of violence against the Handmaids works in a manner that elicits what Psychologist Irving Janis calls "groupthink." Groupthink is defined as a phenomenon of group conformity that influences individual decision-making within a group (Janis 20).

According to Janis:

temporary states of elation, fear, or anger that reduce a person's mental efficiency; chronic blind spots arising from a person's social prejudices; shortcomings in information-processing that prevent a person from comprehending the complex consequences of a seemingly simple policy decision" can affect a group's decision-making and result in individuals conforming to group ideologies for the sake of fitting in (20).

Groupthink works to unify all the Handmaids into a singular entity which makes it easier to control their behaviour and perceptions. Further complicating groupthink is Atwood's incorporation of what George Orwell termed, in his novel *1984*, "doublethink."²¹ The concept of "doublethink" is defined as accepting two contradictory beliefs, opinions, or facts, as truths.²² By blending both of these psychological concepts, Gilead is able to redefine morality and influence the Handmaids' psyche so that they obey their oppressors without question.

One instance in which groupthink and doublethink effect and alter the Handmaids' behaviour is during the process of Testifying. During their time at the Red Centre, the Testifying was an event that worked to brainwash women into believing

²¹ Atwood has claimed in multiple interviews that *The Handmaid's Tale* is in part inspired by Orwell's *1984* ("My Hero: George Orwell by Margaret Atwood").

²² The main character, Winston, in *1984*, defines "doublethink" as: "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them" (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (2003) 40-41.)

Gilead's ideologies.²³ The process of Testifying demonstrates how Gilead enacts psychological domination over the Handmaids by forcing them, through the threat of physical and verbal abuse, to internalize Gilead's beliefs. Handmaids are forced to confess their deepest shame and then are redeemed after being subjected to verbal abuse. When Janine testifies that she was raped, Aunt Helena immediately reframes the narrative by making her the perpetrator of her own trauma. In this interaction, the Aunts utilize the Testifying as a way to teach women to condemn each other. After Aunt Helena reframes the narrative, the Handmaids are then forced to follow her lead. The Handmaids blame Janine, using repetition and humiliation as a tactic not only to blame the women for their role in their trauma but to internalize it themselves:

She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her. Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby. We meant it, which is the bad part. (Atwood 82)

Offred's disgust at Janine indicates how she has fallen prey to these psychological tactics. In the Red Centre, Offred fears for her life; in order to ensure her survival, she knows that she has to fit in. Here is where groupthink falls into place. The emotions triggered in Offred are elicited and influenced by the group of people around her. Simultaneously, she is also partaking in doublethink because her disgust goes against her own knowledge and morals, and yet, in the moment it is a truth: Janine is weak and disgusting. Offred is complicit because she is actively participating in the degradation of her peers despite it being against her better judgment.

Similarly, the Salvaging, is another event in which the Handmaid's loyalty is tested through their complicity in violence. The Salvaging works as a way to unite women in the hanging of criminals (Handmaids and Wives who have committed adultery, treason, and attempted escape). Arguably, this event can be considered an extension of the Testifying; instead of verbally assaulting women for what Gilead defines as sins, the women are pledging their allegiance to Gilead by partaking in the deaths of

²³ The Red Centre used to be a school gymnasium which was converted into a training centre where women are indoctrinated and forced to become Handmaids.

the Salvaging. Once again, the doublethink that occurs in the event of the hangings is that the criminals deserved their deaths while simultaneously understanding that these women's crimes do not actually warrant hanging. Offred admits that by touching the rope she is "consent[ing]" to the deaths and her "complicity" in these deaths (Atwood 288). Yet, she also understands that she does not have any other choice. In this manner, her complicity is complicated because it coincides with her need to survive. Offred complicates her complicity by creating a distinction between her actions and her thoughts. If Gilead has taken all choice away from her body, and her participation in the abuse and murder of women is coerced, her identity cannot be entirely complicit. Where Gilead utilizes these psychological tactics to make her a complete part of the system, Offred retaliates by asserting her rationality and acknowledging her true moral standards. Although she is taking part in committing the crimes with the rest of the Handmaids, her rationality and admission of her guilt allows her to separate herself from Gilead's beliefs and values: Gilead may propagate violence, and force women to enact it, but Offred does not believe or condone its ideologies.

Choosing not to believe in Gilead's ideologies is the morally grey third-space where she can adapt to her circumstances while also keeping room to reject the system. Discerning between Gilead's ideas of right and wrong and her own morality gives Offred a semblance of flexibility where she can choose how much of herself she is willing to sacrifice in order to survive. Another extension of the Testifying and Salvaging where Gilead tests the loyalty of its subjects is during the Particution. What is different about the Particution is that it offers them a choice: "You know the rules for a Particution," Aunt Lydia says. "You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again. Understood?" (Atwood 291). The major differentiating point between the Salvaging and the Particution is the explicit accountability of the individual. The "choice" to participate in the violence proves to the state which women have been successfully re-educated; those who commit violence and partake in abusing the alleged criminal give themselves up voluntarily to the state

because they have made the decision to commit violence in the name of Gilead.²⁴ The Salvaging and the Testifying are different because they are state mandated and enforced, which gives room for each individual to displace their complicity back to the state. The Particicution offers the possibility of a deceptive autonomy. To enact a form of violence, therefore, constitutes choice.

In the face of choice, Offred's is given a circumstance where she can exert her agency and morality. Choosing not to engage in violence allows her to reassert agency over her body and declare where her true allegiance lies: with herself. The Particicution is deliberately scheduled after the Salvaging which gives the state the advantage of exploiting the collective emotion of the Handmaids. After being forced to hang one of their own, Gilead gifts them with a man who has committed atrocities against women. I call it a "gift" because Gilead is offering up a moment of reversal in the power dynamic between man and woman. The Handmaids are granted an opportunity to be, fleetingly, the dominating power in the sexual hierarchy where they can not only abuse but execute a symbol of their oppressor. It is significant to note that the criminal was "once a Guardian" and had already been physically punished, as is evident from his swollen and bruised face, and his "drunk" demeanor (Atwood 290). The man's appearance indicates Gilead's intentionality as to who is presented to the women—this event, as such, is a tactical move that both appeases the Handmaids' pent-up rage and repression, and also emphasizes the value of the sacrifice these women are making. To be offered up a criminal whom they can physically beat becomes a tangible representation of what role the Handmaids play, which is to maintain the sanctity of womanhood. The reaction to hearing about the man's crimes results in a collective "hatred," "bloodlust," and a desire "to tear, gouge, rend" (Atwood 292). To hear about his crimes, and the fact that the narrative includes that the victim was a pregnant woman directly targets the vulnerability of the Handmaids. Offred, herself, feels that "[i]t is too much, this violation" (Atwood 290). Gilead, by presenting them this man, displaces the Handmaids' desire for revenge

²⁴ I place quotations around the word "choice" because it is not really a choice at all. The women who do not participate face the threat of being punished or killed themselves. Ofglen even says to Offred: "They're watching" (Atwood 292) when revealing to her the falsity of the story that the Aunts presented about the man.

and turns their eyes away from the true systemic enemy. The state's message is clear: Gilead is here to protect the women; the men are the true evil. After curating this story and allowing the Handmaids to choose what to do the man, Gilead exerts the extent of its control—the women transform into wild animals whose “nostrils flare, sniffing death,” and who release “sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, [and] yells” (Atwood 291-92). The women choose justice; paradoxically, their justice comes in the form of accepting and obeying Gilead.

Refusing to partake in violence is doubly significant because it reiterates that Offred sees through Gilead's deception, and that she asserts her own morality. Notably, Offred makes her decision to choose pacifism before she learns through Ofglen that the story they were given was a lie: “Don't be stupid. He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours” (Atwood 292). In fact, even in her past and thoughts, Offred remains the predominant figure who is averse to violence. She initially describes herself as apolitical because she is unwilling to indulge in violence for a cause as Moira and her mother did.²⁵ Although in the pre-Gileadean world, her pacifism had signified her political neutrality, in Gilead, it becomes a source of resistance. Refusing to be violent means that Offred denies the groupthink or doublethink that Gilead uses to control the women; her identity is at the forefront, and her condemnation of the system is clear. For example, when Offred thinks that she “would like to strangle” Aunt Lydia, she immediately “shove[s] this thought away,” demonstrating a self-reflexive discipline that counters Gilead's attempt to breach into her psyche (124). In terms of the Particution, Offred uses self-reflection and projection to connect and understand the accused Guardian: “I try to look inside him, inside the trashed face, see what he must really look like. I think he's about thirty. It isn't Luke. But it could have been, I know that. It could be Nick. I know that whatever he's done I can't touch him” (291-92). Here, again, Offred is reasserting her past and third-space into the present. She brings Luke and Nick into the picture and defines the accused on her own terms. As such, she is actively questioning

²⁵ Refer to pages 81 and 189 in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Moira enters the Red Centre with a bruise on her face, implying some sort of physical resistance against her oppression. Offred's mother returns home with cuts on her face after participating in the abortion riots. Even Luke commits violence when he euthanizes the cat before he, Offred, and their daughter attempt to escape the country (Atwood 202)

and challenging the narrative that Gilead has fed her and making clear that she is aware of who the real enemy is. Gilead's gift is not enough to sway her, nor is her fear of those in power enough to make her disappear.

Serena

Complicity and victimhood are much more difficult to discern when taking Serena Joy into consideration. As a woman, Serena fills a particularly complex space not only because of her status as a Wife but because of her role in founding Gilead. Arguably, Serena can be considered one of the most dangerous characters because of her position of power; she demonstrates that “not only are men capable of harming minority women, but women themselves are able to hurt and continue the oppression of women” (AlTaher 4). Interestingly, Serena's power is established before the creation of Gilead, during her time as a televangelist. Most reminiscent of the televangelist Anita Bryant during the 1960s and 70s, Serena begins her career as a hymn singer, who then transforms into a spokesperson for the growing religious community in the nation. Of course, Serena's situation is much more extreme than what occurred with Anita Bryant (in that, Serena's movement led to the establishment of an extremist and totalitarian nation), but the similarities between them—for instance, Serena, just like Anita, also faced issues with fertility; Anita and Serena both advocate for reverting back to traditional household dynamics, submitting to husbands by choice—makes Atwood's speculations clear: these women, despite being marginalized and not taken seriously, carry an immense power to influence and change the trajectory of the future.²⁶

Serena's earnest belief in her faith plays a large part in the danger she poses to the rest of the population. Like Bryant and Tammy Faye Bakker who believed in “the basic

²⁶ Unlike Serena Joy in the novel, Anita Bryant was ultimately able to get pregnant: “Shortly after their marriage, Bryant learned that she might not be able to have children. . . . Based on the advice of friends, the couple decided to adopt a child and, in 1963, they brought home an infant son whom they named Bobby. Within a few weeks, Bryant discovered that she was pregnant. She gave birth to a daughter, Gloria Lynn, when their son was only seven-and-a-half months old.” (Johnson 42-43). The couple later wanted two more children, and Anita had another set of twins, which, to them, was “further evidence of God's very direct response to prayer” (Johnson 42-43). However, it is interesting to see the initial parallelism between them both. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine the choice of making Serena pregnant in the TV series.

premises of submission doctrine, including a firm belief in binary gender and family roles” (Johnson 110), and in “preserving the union that they believed had always existed between conservative Christian values and American ideals” (Johnson 50), Serena also advocates these beliefs.²⁷ Serena, herself, admits this to Offred when she says: “It’s one of the things we fought for” (Atwood 26). The way that she performs plays a big part in how she reaches her audience. Like Bryant and Bakker, Serena performs the traditional feminine identity. Her name, for instance, echoes the ways in which Bryant and Bakker utilized transparency of their personal lives to connect to other women and show them the benefits of being part of the Moral Majority. Bakker had her own TV network called PTL, which she established with her husband; Bryant had her own show, ABM, and had published several books that discussed her personal experiences as a Wife and a Christian.²⁸ In her books, Bryant was known for “a more intimate, familiar, and spontaneous style typical of evangelical women’s culture” and “variously emphasized themes of marriage, family, and Christian witness, drawing on the evangelical tradition of personal testimony to present her life experiences both as models for emulation and as sources of cautionary example” (Johnson 45). In the same manner, on PTL, Bakker and her husband “ad libbed most of their programming, and Tammy especially presented with such candor that many viewers almost regarded the Bakkers as family or as intimate friends” (Johnson 102). Offred points out a similar trait in Serena’s on-screen performance:

One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano. She was ash-blond, petite, with a snub nose and huge blue eyes which she’d turn upwards during hymns. She could smile and cry at the same time, one tear or two sliding gracefully down her cheek, as if on cue, as her voice lifted through its highest notes, tremulous, effortless. (Atwood 26)

²⁷ Connecting her more with Bryant, Serena’s platform also resides on wifedom and motherhood. Refer to Johnson page 61 on Bryant’s beliefs about motherhood and wifedom.

²⁸ Refer to chapters on Anita Bryant and Tammy Faye Bakker in: Johnson, Emily Suzanne. *This Is Our Message: Women’s Leadership in the New Christian Right*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

In this description, alongside her physical beauty, Offred highlights the performativity of Serena's sincerity. Her ability to cry "on cue," indicates a level of deception in what she is preaching; on-screen, Serena is acting—her emotions are exploitative and intentional. Similarly, her name becomes yet another element to cement her identity as the traditional feminine woman. The irony of her name is not simply that "she radiates anything but serenity and joy," but that the very name is a tool used to market a system that ultimately deprives women of their freedom (Templin 150). By embodying a name that proclaims exaggeratedly traditionalist values, she markets herself as the proper woman. Her time as a gospel singer and religious celebrity places her as the face of true womanhood and sells it as something that should be desired.

The extent of Serena's power is evident in her speeches; mirroring Gilead, Serena also weaponizes logic to entrap followers into doublethink and groupthink. Atwood describes Serena Joy as "one of the women like Margaret Thatcher, who go around saying women's place is in the home, and they make in fact rather a public career of saying that," which not only emphasizes the neoliberal influence in her words, but that Serena Joy herself is the very institution that oppresses women in Gilead (Terkel 11:43). Interestingly, Serena does not say all that much in the novel. Offred points out that:

She wasn't singing any more by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all.
(Atwood 55)

Here, Serena's words not only echo the sentiments that Bryant and Bakker were marketing but demonstrates how insidious her circular logic can be. Serena's claim that "this failure of hers" is "a sacrifice ... for the good of all" imitates the same logic that Bryant and Bakker used to convince women that their oppression was desirable. For instance, Bryant claimed that "[t]he act of submission is something that happens between equals, something that happens by choice" (Bryant qtd. In Johnson 46). Similarly, Bakker states: "I think Christian women are the most liberated women in the whole world. ... I love being under submission to my husband. That, to me, is not a lack of liberation" (Bakker qtd in. Johnson 110). What all of these statements have in common is the

acknowledgement that there is an element of “sacrifice” that women are making, but that this is voluntary. The use of words like “choice” or “for the good of all” posits their oppression as something that is morally good and something that brings women autonomy: their lack of choice is not really oppression because it occurs by choice. Presented under the guise of women who have experienced this oppression—Serena made this “sacrifice for the good of all,” Bakker “love[s] being under submission to [her] husband,” and Bryant chose this life for herself—followers of these women believe they are taking a comparatively ambiguous, if not righteous, political stance. Rationalizing their oppression becomes much easier because it is the singular platform upon which they adamantly vocalize their opinions, and as the face of true womanhood, their words become that much more powerful.

At the forefront of Serena’s figure as a religious spokesperson is her frivolous appearance and performativity. Her appearance, later in her career, imitates that of Tammy Faye whose “makeup and fashion choices have drawn such derision, allowing critics to dismiss her quintessentially frivolous, silly, and inconsequential” (Johnson 106). Similarly, Offred describes Serena with “her sprayed hair, her hysteria, and the tears she could still produce at will, and the mascara blackening her cheeks. By that time she was wearing more makeup,” highlighting the shift from her conservative image earlier in her career to one that, arguably, parodies Bakker’s appearance (Atwood 56).²⁹ Using terms such as “her hysteria” and then conjoining that with elements of her physical appearance, emphasizes the ways in which Serena is marginalized in her own speeches. In Bakker’s case, her image may have “reflect[ed] a persistent assumption within evangelical communities that women’s ministries were less serious (in every sense of the word) than were the ministries typically led by men for mixed-gender congregations,” but it was her very “position as a prominent woman in a cultural context that downplayed her contribution” that “made it possible for her to push at the theological and political boundaries of the New Christian Right” (Johnson 115). When watching Serena make her speeches, Offred and Luke thought that “she was funny,” similar to how Bryant and Bakker were treated in their careers (Atwood 56). However, Offred immediately

²⁹ Bakker was known for wearing a lot of eye-makeup; Serena’s dripping mascara seems to directly allude to that. (Johnson 98, 106).

contradicts this thought by stating: “Or Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest” (Atwood 56). Here, Offred emphasizes the underlying power that Serena has. Serena’s marginality becomes the source of her power in advocating for the creation of Gilead. Atwood cleverly demonstrates how Luke’s reaction and Offred’s passivity may have contributed to the creation of Gilead. It is important that Serena’s hysteria results from someone trying to “shoot her and miss[ing]” (Atwood 56); her words, at this point had already gained enough traction to elicit a violent response. Returning momentarily to Atwood’s comparison of Serena and Margaret Thatcher, Atwood shows the effect of female characters propagating oppressive systems. Bryant and Bakker ultimately faced intense backlash for their scandalous relationship with their husbands (Bakker’s husband was unfaithful, and Bryant ultimately divorced Green) which places them outside of the very system that they purport to believe in; yet their time being famous and on-screen created a movement that went down in history. Similarly, Serena’s power was that she propelled a movement that allowed Gilead’s regime to take over: she was not only able to speak freely; she was heard.

Becoming Victim: Taking her word

The irony of being heard is that Serena ultimately becomes silenced by the system she fought for. As a Wife, she now has to follow the very submission to her husband that she preached earlier in her career; it is her “‘God-given right’ ... to be obedient and submissive to [her] husband, who is the wife’s master” (Joyce 4, 5). Where Serena once had the platform and fame to speak up and out about her beliefs, that very ability has now made her a property that can be owned by her husband. As Wives, women “function as a relational term between groups of men ... [they] *reflect* masculine identity precisely through ... the site of its absence” (*Gender Trouble* 50). What this means is that monogamous, heteronormative marriage in Gilead requires that the Wives become sites of absences and silence. The sacrifice that Serena ultimately makes is the loss of her presence. That is not to say that Serena does not benefit from Gilead; her marriage protects her from the laws of the state and grants her a comparatively safe and luxurious lifestyle. For instance, although Serena Joy is sterile, she does not face the same

consequences that the Unwomen do because of her relationship with the Commander. Yet, the very system hinges on an inherent contradiction, and likewise, so does Serena's power. Where her status offers her comparative power—which is evident in the way she interacts with the Handmaids and Marthas, where she often indulges in violence to control the women around her—it also marginalizes and oppresses her. Perhaps the most important question to ask is why does Serena enact forms of violence against other women? How does doing so benefit her? The answer, arguably, resides in what she has lost with the establishment of Gilead; the very identity of wifehood, ultimately becomes her downfall. Pre-Gilead, Serena Joy had purpose as spokesperson, but in Gilead, she has no real function.³⁰ So, although, she may not be as oppressed as the rest of the women in Gilead, she has lost a major part of her power to her husband. Re-establishing that power is the only way Serena can survive and maintain a presence in a world that no longer needs it.

Whereas, as the Wife, Serena should have a semblance of control and agency in her household, even this autonomy does not exist. Historically, the 19th century American wife's "authority was exerted entirely by way of symbolism" and "her great virtue was submissiveness and obedience to the will of her spouse, and her central role was that of comforter," Serena finds herself in an even lesser position (Demos 15). She cannot offer her husband anything, including emotional intimacy. The domestic sphere offers her no control or agency; rather, very much like Offred, she is a decorative object that the Commander "inherited ... and he hasn't figured out what to do with" (Atwood 97). What becomes evident is that Serena's word has taken away her identity and made her what she fears most: powerless. In fact, where the caste system positions the Wives above the Handmaids, her relationship with the Handmaids challenges whether there is any true difference between them at all. Religiously, the female figure is obligated to not only submit to her husband but to fulfill her "duty to provide children" (Joyce 11). In fact, the wife's reproductive ability "eventually take[s] precedence over her role as companion

³⁰ It must be noted that I am not arguing that Serena is not complicit. Undeniably, she is accountable for the abuse she extends towards other women. She is most blatantly a part of the problem. However, what I am arguing is that her complicity, like Offred's, is much more complex. As such, it is worth examining the ways in which Serena's complicity plays into her survival and resistance against her oppressors, and how this all fits into the larger category of feminism.

and helpmeet” (Joyce 11). In Gilead, consequently, the Wives are placed at the center of a paradox: the Wives are women whose duty it is to produce children but are biologically unable to. It is here where the Wives lose the semblance of power their marriage grants them. Unlike the Handmaids who “can be redeemed through their services” of procreation, “the Wives are irredeemable,” (Harner 22); instead, they are labelled “defeated women” which further emphasizes their purposelessness (Atwood 46). In a state that “contractually binds the Commanders to protect the interests of Gilead” through procreation, the Wives inability to reproduce hinders the Commanders’ ability to elevate their ranks (Atwood 61). Without fertility, Serena has no use in her relationship, household, or nation; she is not only a woman whose body is physically defeated due to her sterility, but she has also been defeated by the very system she is a part of.

Interestingly, Serena’s age plays a big part in her identity. As an older woman, Serena is unable to provide the fertility or beauty that Offred (and her comparable youth) offers.³¹ She is not only withered but is also described as “no longer a flawless cut-paper profile, her face is sinking in upon itself” (Atwood 56). Describing Serena’s face in this manner targets two elements of her uselessness in Gilead; firstly, the fact that her face is “sinking upon itself” could indicate that she is old and wrinkled, and secondly, it could suggest that Gilead has caused her to physically deteriorate. Whereas Serena’s body and appearance had value on-screen while she made her speeches, in Gilead, that very presence is collapsing in on itself; in this manner, what Offred points out is Serena’s very presence slowly dwindling. The importance of this description is that it reveals an underlying incompatibility between Serena, Gilead, and Serena’s womanhood. Offred

³¹ To be old and barren is to be functionless; her identity in Gilead only exists because of her marriage to the Commander. More importantly, Serena’s age defines her stagnancy and unyieldingness to her situation. With her arthritic knees and hobbling walk, Serena is physically unable to go anywhere (Atwood 91). Unlike Offred, Serena has no hope of being able to leave her situation; rather, her fight must occur in place. This is evident in the way Serena fights against the women and men around her. Exploiting the power dynamics within her marriage and household offers Serena agency and identity that she does not have elsewhere. To fight actively means to give herself function, which wifehood has taken away from her.

Although this essay does not extensively analyze Serena’s age and authority, it would be interesting to consider how age demarcates her as less useful in Gilead. It would be interesting to examine how her age pits her against not only the Handmaids but younger Wives as well. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine how the dynamic of her marriage is influenced by her age.

further this line of thought when she sees Serena in dressed in her best floral dress: “No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can’t use them any more, you’re withered. They’re the genital organs of plants” (Atwood 91). Once again, these thoughts remove Serena from her femininity and work in a manner to desexualize her. The very sight of the plants on her dress is contradictory because Serena does not hold the power to be able to reproduce; rather, Offred is the one who carries that power. The paradox here is that the Handmaid carries more value than the Wife—Serena is supposedly the oppressor of the Handmaids, yet her existence in Gilead is also entirely dependent on them. As such, Serena’s actions, whether they are violent or at the expense of other women, are also arguably driven by her need to survive and resist her obsolescence.

Resistance: Violence

Childless, barren, and trapped in an unsatisfying marriage, Serena’s manipulative and abusive behaviour towards Offred becomes a means for her to re-exert her power and presence. Serena understands that to be associated with Offred means a reduction in her agency; without a child, Offred slowly starts invading the spaces that Serena once filled. The Ceremony is a significant event that undermines all of Serena’s authority when she is forced to witness the Handmaid and her husband copulate. The Handmaids and Wives are placed side-by-side in a manner that makes them similar in their oppression. By physically positioning the two women together, Serena’s identity is merged with, and accordingly demoted to, the Handmaid; they are “one flesh, one being,” which invariably divides Serena’s selfhood and attaches it to Offred (Atwood 104). It is at this point where I return to Atwood’s comparison of Serena and Thatcher; Serena is the consequence of women such as Thatcher, Bakker, and Bryant, being taken at their word. Serena knows that this is what she fought for, and so, she cannot protest her husband or Gilead because to do so would be to undermine her own initial power. To maintain her agency, however, Serena also needs to ensure that the female caste system remains intact. Offred becomes the necessary body to victimize so that Serena can re-establish her role as the Wife. In her article on hegemonic masculinity, Louisa Smith states that one way women are able to enter male dominated workplaces is by “tak[ing] on ‘surrogate maleness’ in order to access position of power” (862). Serena Joy similarly embodies traits of “surrogate

maleness” in order to access the power at the top of the gender hierarchy. However, her decision to embody masculinity may be even more complicated than simply accessing male power; it could also be a way Serena rejects her identity as victim.³² By associating herself with the male gender, Serena is able to redefine the way her identity is perceived on her own terms; in order to associate with the male gender, however, she must emulate the same violence towards other women. In this way, her complicity becomes a mode of resistance against the way Gilead defines women. What Serena wants is to be, in the eyes of her household and the larger community, is the Commander’s equivalent.

One way that Serena steps into her power is by indulging in physical violence. In order for her to do this, she steps into the Commander and Gilead’s power by re-enacting the abuse the state inflicts on women. Where the Commander can coerce and control Offred’s body, Serena finds ways to do the same. For instance, during the Ceremony, Serena distances herself from Offred by physically hurting her hands: “[t]he rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge” (Atwood 104). By law, the Wives are not allowed to physically hurt the Handmaids, but just as the Aunts targeted Moira’s feet at the Red Centre, Serena also skirts around the law by punishing the parts of Offred she does not need.³³ Interestingly, Offred’s use of the word “revenge” undermines the power that Serena tries to exert—for Serena to desire revenge means that she is aware that she has lost something to Offred. At the end of the Ceremony, Serena’s desperation for power is further portrayed when she forces Offred to immediately leave despite knowing that “[s]he’s supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances” (Atwood 106). It is significant to note that she is willing to risk the chances of Offred getting pregnant in turn for a semblance of control. What I am highlighting here is that Serena’s role as a perpetrator of Gileadean abuse against the Handmaids is a—albeit, misguided and dangerous—form of resistance that enables her to exploit the system for her own benefit. The irony is that Serena’s attempt at resistance is equally as futile as Offred’s. In fact, Offred further challenges Serena’s power when she

³² In this context, I refer to masculinity as male power and privilege as is evident in Gilead.

³³ The violence enacted against Moira’s feet will be analyzed in the subsection on Moira later in this essay.

asks: “Which of us is it worse for, her or me?” thereby recognizing the paradox of becoming a Wife (Atwood 106). Like Offred, Serena cannot survive in Gilead if she disappears. There is a strange mutual understanding of their situations; despite being systematically pitted against one another, both Offred and Serena recognize that their survival hinges upon each other, and that their oppression is shared despite the fact that Serena has more power than Offred. Yet, where this connection should hypothetically increase empathy or female empowerment, it only gives Serena a reason and space to dominate Offred. Serena’s refusal to connect with Offred highlights the dangers of not only advocating for neoliberal, religiously extreme ideologies that oppress women, but also the dangers of internalizing these very beliefs. Like the televangelists of the 70s and 80s, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood reveals the dangers of falling prey to a circular logic of choosing to be oppressed. At the end, Serena’s propaganda for Gilead only traps her in her own oppression. Serena’s treatment of Offred reveals what Atwood is examining in this novel: what happens when these evangelical women get what they want? In this case, Serena cannot blame herself or the system; the most convenient scapegoat becomes other women. Offred is Serena’s opposition because she is taking away what little room of authority Serena had.

The extent of Serena’s need for power becomes clear when she plays an active role in Offred’s rape. Participating in Offred’s oppression allows Serena to exploit “the legal 'territory' of the Commanders” by controlling Offred through blackmail (Atwood 216). As such, Serena both dominates Offred and challenges the extent of the Commander’s power. In this situation, Serena refuses to acknowledge Offred or the Commander as her equals; rather, by stepping into Gilead’s power, she is able to view herself as a state power enacting the control that was always hers to begin with. On the one level, blackmailing Offred positions her as the Commander’s equivalent because it parallels what the Commander does to get Offred to have an affair with him. Here, again, she is enacting a comparatively “masculine trait” (that is, exercising coercive power over female bodies) in order to benefit from the patriarchal law. Blackmailing Offred not only brings Serena pleasure, but reinstates her identity as Serena Joy, rather than as the Wife (Atwood 216). As she indulges in blackmail, Offred notes that Serena is “actually smiling, coquettishly even; there’s a hint of her former small-screen mannequin’s allure,

flickering over her face like momentary static” (Atwood 216). In the act, Serena is granted a momentary taste of her previous power; she is being heard, and her word carries enough value to control Offred. Having something to hold over Offred allows Serena to have the same standing as her husband because now her word is as important to Offred as his. More importantly, being able to physically control Offred returns to Serena a level of authority—now, Offred is not merely obliged to follow Gilead’s and the Commander’s law within the household; Serena’s rules must also be obeyed. However, Serena takes her control a step further by subverting the power dynamic between her and her husband. When suggesting to Offred that she should start a sexual relationship with Nick, Serena mentions the Commander’s infertility, despite it being “heresy” (Atwood 215). By pointing out the Commander’s infertility, she undermines his power: it is not the woman, but rather, the man who is “damaged, defective” (216). Yet, again, Serena enacts a form of authoritarian control over the male sex. Whereas previously it was Serena’s face that was withered and old, and her body that was desexualized, this time the Commander is under similar scrutiny. Her words work in a manner to degrade and marginalize the very person she is supposed to be in submission to, thus removing him from his absolute authority. Subsequently, Serena re-invades her household and enlarges her presence. The extent of her authority comes to light when Serena mentions that “[w]omen do it frequently. All the time,” implying she is not the only Wife to have blackmailed her Handmaid (216). Moreover, her statement implies that there is a community among the Wives and that they are, like the Eyes, also watching.³⁴ In her admission that the Wives talk to each other, Serena complicates her complicity further by obfuscating what freedom means to them. The Wives, just like Serena, are not looking for freedom from Gilead; instead, they obtain freedom by exploiting the system so that they can fill roles of authority. In this way, the narrative demonstrates the insidious ways in which women themselves become their own oppressors; the Wives might be silenced in Gilead, but there is movement behind the scenes.

Offred gleans insight to the extent of power that the network of Wives potentially has, and the tragedy of misusing this power, when Serena blackmails Offred. When

³⁴ The Eyes are the secret police that monitors the streets of Gilead to ensure nobody breaks the law.

Offred asks Serena about what the Commander would think about the blackmail, Serena responds “with a firmness; no, more than that, a clenched look, like a purse snapping shut. ‘We just won’t tell him, will we?’” (Atwood 216). Here, again, Serena’s decision to break the law behind the Commander’s back highlights how her silence is political. By deliberately excluding the Commander from her plans, and by utilizing her position to further oppress Offred, Serena shows off her power to Offred. Her display of power imitates what the Commander could only do at Jezebel’s, but Serena does it in her own home, in the parlour. What this signifies is that Serena’s authority extends, to an extent, beyond the Commander. Although everyone in Gilead is oppressed and Serena has become silenced, her blackmailing and abuse of other women reveals an inherent danger in how she rationalizes her decisions; from her perspective, Serena is resisting and is actively fighting for what she wants. Despite her role in perpetuating Gilead’s system, Serena, then, can still be read as a figure of resistance; she is asserting her agency, subjectivity, and using self-regulation and self-accountability to maintain a platform of power for herself. As such, the ideology that Serena propagates—and Atwood warns against—is a neoliberal one that “promotes the justification of ever greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him- or herself as an enterprise” (Mottahedeh 102). Serena is not only the embodiment of the system, but she is also following the rules of the system because they benefit her. The tragedy is that Serena’s understanding of power and freedom prevents other women from the possibility of ever escaping their oppression.

Silence and Space

Interestingly, Serena’s idea of resistance is defined far earlier in the novel. Battling against the threat of disappearing, Serena reasserts her subjectivity in the background. Even though Gilead’s regime effectively silences women, Serena evades this element of Gilead’s control by dislocating her voice. Interior decoration, for instance, becomes a way that Serena ensures her presence is not erased from the household. For a house that is lawfully not hers, Serena takes claim of the space by asserting her “tastes” for “quality, [and] soft sentimental cravings” in the interior design (Atwood 90). As such, despite having no room to voice her opinions, her house demonstrates that she is still

speaking. The room presents her likes and dislikes, indicating that Serena, at the very least, has control over the physical appearance of the house. In this way, she translates her identity into the aesthetics, which allows her to displace her authority outside of her body. Serena's "tidy habits" signals the level of control that she still has (Atwood 119); she gets to decide what belongs or does not belong in the room and how each item is placed within the room. She does not simply fill in the visual gap, but makes her presence known through the other senses, like her scent: "The room smells of lemon oil, heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking that have made their way from the kitchen of the dining room, and of Serena Joy's perfume: Lily of the Valley" (Atwood 90). Consequently, Serena's grip over the physical geography of the house is undeniable. Even though the state works to make the Wives nearly invisible, Serena is everywhere.

What is most interesting is that the identity that Serena chooses to express within the house is as Serena Joy rather than as the Wife. The traditional, feminine design of the house and the cushions with the words "Charity," "Hope," and "Faith," (Atwood 119) parallel her persona (and the words she spoke) as the televangelist. Additionally, in the novel, Serena "is associated with the colour blue" (Roland 20); the "Faith" cushion in the house is also "faded blue" in colour (Atwood 67). These similarities do not only reveal that Serena has effectively maintained and kept her identity as Serena Joy, but that she still advocates the same ideologies even in her state of oppression. Serena's status as the Wife, therefore, becomes much more complex. On the one hand, the system oppresses her; Offred notices this when she perceives Serena's silence and uses that to empathize with—and sometimes, even pity—her. Krista K. Miranda demonstrates how:

While her disability and inability to reproduce are not explicitly connected, June's descriptions not only create an implicit link between the two but also employ imagery that adheres Serena Joy's immoral character with her inability to reproduce. (Miranda 90)

Serena's incompatibility and complicity, in this way, go together; despite her status as a Wife (which presumably saves her from being deemed unwoman), Serena is still removed from her "biological destiny," and thereby also removed from her femininity (*Gender Trouble* 113). Her invisibility comes from the fact that she, herself, does not belong to the social hierarchy that she has been a part in establishing. On the other hand,

it is her very vulnerability and biological weakness that presents Serena space to resist and reverse gender power dynamics. Her position of oppression is desirable because it leaves room for her to establish power over others.

Silence

The advantages of wielding Gilead's own control over bodies within the household become evident when Serena uses the same tactics to rebalance her marriage. The politics of silence and space, for instance, allow Serena to reinstate her agency with the Commander and remind both who really is in charge. Normally, by law, Serena has the power to make the Commander knock and wait before allowing him to enter the sitting room; Gilead, in this way, specifies the geography of where the Wives are and are not in control. As Offred acknowledges, it is the "little things [that] mean a lot," being able to make the Commander wait allows Serena the illusion of having a comparatively equal stance to her husband (Atwood 97); he must obey her in this situation, and consequently, loses the sole power he carries as the head of the house. During the Bible reading, the Commander storms into Serena's "territory" without knocking, thereby challenging any power that Serena believes she has (97). Yet, Offred offsets the Commander's actions by remarking that his behaviour must be elicited by what Serena may or may not have said "over the silver-encrusted table (97). What Offred foregrounds in her observations is Serena's authority. The fact that the Commander must "break protocol" to punish Serena reveals that her words (or silence) has affected him enough to make his reassertion of power a necessity (97). Significantly, Serena's hidden authority allows her to place herself and the Commander side-by-side as counterparts (to an extent) negotiating the power that they share as a couple.

By choosing to view herself as the dominant individual in her relationship, Serena's invisibility as the Wife works as a third-space that not only gives her space to encroach into the Commander's power but also allows her to exert a form of "interior colonization" onto him (Millet 25). The extent of her control is portrayed in the way the Commander notices and depends on her existence. When Offred indulges in an affair with the Commander, he responds with "[a]nyway, she won't talk to me much any more. We don't seem to have much in common, these days" (Atwood 166). Although his

comment could be considered as the way in which the Commander rationalizes his desire for connection with the Handmaids, I argue that it also reveals the control that Serena has in the relationship. His comment signals that he notices Serena's absence; in other words, Serena has taken up a space in the Commander's mind. By selecting when to speak or not, Serena controls what she gives and takes away from the Commander, thereby reminding him that she shares in his status and power. Her silence is enough to evoke yet another reaction in which the Commander must turn to his Handmaid to reiterate his authority. Serena's presence challenges him and works to split his role as the head of the house. This is most evident in the way that Serena utilizes the Commander's absence. By refusing to speak to him, Serena also marginalizes his existence from her reality. Serena's silence does not only make her absent from the Commander's life, but it also encourages the absence of the Commander from her life. While waiting for the Commander before the Bible reading, Serena steps into his shoes and takes charge of the household. It is symbolic that while watching a male singer on TV, Serena "turns him off" (Atwood 94). In this moment she, as a woman, is censoring and silencing the male figure. Her status as Wife grants her this ability to do so in secret. Further aligning herself with the Commander, when Serena initially enters the sitting room, she disregards the women in the room, only making sure to nod at Nick (Atwood 91). Without the Commander, Serena is at the top of the power hierarchy within the household; she is the one who can now command others. It is important to note that she is not denying her role as the Wife; instead, she relies on it. Being a Wife grants her the power to invade spaces of the house, silence, and the lives of the individuals who are cast below her in the hierarchy of power. Consequently, going against the system is not in Serena's interest because it threatens the very life that she desires.

Eve-Complex: Mother of the Gardens

Undeniably, where Serena would gain the most power would be as a mother; having a child would give her household prestige. However, what complicates Serena's power is the condition of the Eve-Complex, which prevents her from defining motherhood on her own terms. One of the main implications of the Eve-Complex is that motherhood becomes a state of perpetual atonement for the Wives. According to Janna

Harner, who analyzes the religious oppression depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the gardens “symbolize [the Wives’] inability to have children and systemize works to atone for their failings” (Harner 23). Offred even notes this when she describes Serena gardening as “penance” (Atwood 161). The sight of Serena on “her knees” doing physical labour for the sake of her garden, a place where she can enact maternal care, further reifies the image of someone atoning (161). As Harner argues: “Gilead binds its constituents in an impossible covenant that requires ... wives to create their own “pinhead” constructions, made for destruction, as unending punishment” (Harner 23). Although the garden is a designated space for Wives to take ownership of, it is also a systematic way to enforce their failure as women, and to keep them entrapped in a cycle of their biological failure.

Yet, what is important about the garden is the exclusion of the male figure. The Garden of Eden is a place where man and woman “share[s] the joint task of serving and keeping the earth,” but in Serena’s garden, she is alone (Deutschmann 102). On the one hand, the absence of the Commander can be read as the state further magnifying the hierarchy between man and wife. The house, which the Commander owns, looms over the garden, creating the image of the man watching over the woman. On the other hand, his absence allows Serena to reject the religious command and utilize the space to emulate the Commander’s authority. Despite the gardens being a purgatory to atone for her infertility, Serena utilizes the space as a place to exert her subjectivity. In the garden, she is the one who “directs, pointing with her stick” to design and maintain the integrity of the space (Atwood 22). The contradiction lies in this very subjectivity and agency that Serena finds in her gardens. On the one hand, Serena is able to sublimate her desire for children by birthing a garden where she can take ownership of the flowers. Seeding the bulbs and doing the dirty work, in this way, can be read as both a form of penance instilled by Gilead, as well as a tragic, almost perverse, imitation of birth. By raising a field of fertile flowers, Serena transfers her inability to reproduce into something that can. Playing into her penance allows Serena to reclaim a semblance of authority and functionality she does not have elsewhere; the gardens provide her a space to displace her maternal desires onto that she can control. On the other hand, gardening can be a silent recognition of the lack of power she has in Gilead. To view her flowers as pseudo-

children would grant Serena the possibility to “provide meaning to life,” however what occurs instead is the blatant demonstration of what she lacks (Jonathan Palmer 3). It is significant that Offred notices life within the tulips, as if the flowers themselves are subjects: “a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there” (Atwood 22). The term “heal” is most telling of what Serena must pay for by abiding and relying on the Eve-Complex; just like the maternal care she enacts with the flower, her identity as mother will never be real.

Viewing the gardens as a space of speaking further emphasizes the parts of Serena that are missing. Karla Roland’s phonetic reading of tulips (two lips) which she reads as “a kiss from two lips” or “the two red lips of a woman’s vagina,” can also be read as lips for speaking and truth-telling (22). Offred notes the vocality of Serena’s garden when she says: “There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (Atwood 161). The gardens, in this manner, are a cry for help—Serena is speaking through the tulips with a voice of trauma. Offred sees this when the tulips become a way for her to mediate a level of empathy with Serena. She sees that Serena is buried, too. Additionally, through her tulips, what becomes evident is Serena’s isolation. Alone on her knees, Serena is paying the price for what she wanted all along.

Moira

Body & Sexuality

Distinguishing her from Offred and the rest of the characters in the novel is Moira’s identity as lesbian. As a lesbian, Moira is exempt from “a system of compulsory heterosexuality,” and is free “from the politics of sex” (*Gender Trouble* 26). Feminists such as Judith Butler and Adrienne Rich have explored the politics behind lesbianism to showcase how such an identity is able to tackle male dominated institutions. They argue that being lesbian is more than a sexual identity that challenges the heterosexual norm; rather, it is a political identity that foregrounds female agency and subjectivity. According to Rich: “Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the

rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women” (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 649). Rich views sexuality as a power structure and argues that heterosexuality should be perceived in the same way: as an institution of power rather than as the presumed “sexual preference” of most women (633). As a lesbian, Moira can position her subjectivity and agency outside of male dominated power institutions; the patriarchy cannot define her identity or sexuality because she does not fit the heterosexual norms that it recognizes. By positioning herself outside of the system, Moira’s identity is inherently incompatible with Gilead. Her identity is a standalone form of resistance.

To understand the extent of Moira’s resistance, it is important to see how Gilead works to eradicate lesbian identity and how it imposes heterosexuality on women. Adrienne Rich uses the framework outlined by Kathleen Gough in her essay “The Origin of the Family” to determine how “male power in archaic and contemporary societies” enforce compulsory heterosexuality. According to Gough, there are eight characteristics that define male power:

[1] men’s ability to deny women sexuality or [2] to force it upon them; [3] to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; [4] to control or rob them of their children; [5] to confine them physically and prevent their movement; [6] to use them as objects in male transactions; [7] to cramp their creativeness; [8] or to withhold them from large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments. (Gough qtd. in “Compulsory Heterosexuality” 638)

Gilead indulges in all eight characteristics. The first three points are evident in Gilead’s biopolitical control over women: women are desexed, heterosexuality is imposed upon them (each household is designated with a Commander and his Wife); Handmaids are deprived of their children and Unwomen are sterilized; women constitute objects who are transacted between men; women are not allowed to be educated or have limited education, and women are bound to their designated spaces (Handmaids and Wives to their assigned homes and Unwomen sent to the outskirts of the city). Unlike Offred, Moira does not have any possibility of depending on a man to survive because no one on the LGBTQ+ spectrum is recognized in Gilead. The criminalization of same-sex relationships, once again, reveals the neoliberal agenda underlying Gilead and the

targeting of female bodies. As Martinez argues, the “repression of reproductive rights are . . . common motives in authoritarian neoliberalism” because it is considered “a necessary measure for its preservation as economic freedom” (Martinez 598-99). The only way Gilead survives and ensures its survival is through the production of children who, in turn, guarantee reproducing the system and producing more bodies (having more children) to reproduce the system in the future. Gilead, essentially, removes anyone outside of heterosexual marriages and relationships because they do not provide Gilead with capital. As a lesbian, Moira denies Gilead the possibility of reproduction. By complying with her marginalization and refusing to allow Gilead to access her body, Moira utilizes her sexuality as a tool to disrupt Gilead’s reproduction. She chooses how her body will or will not be used.

Visual Appearance

One of the ways that Moira maintains her agency over her body is through her appearance. Prior to Gilead, Moira’s appearance was one that intentionally stood out: “her purple overalls, one dangly earring, the gold fingernail she wore to be eccentric, [and] a cigarette between her stubby yellow-ended fingers” (Atwood 47). Describing her gold fingernail as “eccentric” highlights how even before her oppression, Moira refused any law, rule, label, or social norm from overwriting her sense of self. When she is captured, three weeks after Offred, and brought to the gymnasium, it is Moira’s appearance that is foregrounded: she was wearing “jeans and a blue sweatshirt” and still had “her hair [cut] short” (Atwood 81). Moreover, she enters the gymnasium with a “bruise on her left cheek” (Atwood 81), indicating a level of active resistance against her oppressors. As such, the image of Moira is imbued with her agency and subjectivity. Her body becomes a site of resistance through which she can visually counteract Gilead’s attempt to invade and colonize her. For instance, despite being forced into the Handmaid uniform, Moira’s battered body announces her refusal to comply with the law. If it is not her voice that can speak her dissent, her body vocalizes her refusal to belong to Gilead. Inadvertently, she exposes the limits to Gilead’s power by allowing her body to undergo the threat of physical punishment rather than accept her state of oppression; despite getting caught the first time and having her feet whipped by “steel cables, frayed at the

ends,” Moira continues her fight until she is able to escape (102). The appearance of her physical body becomes a space of salvation—a place where she has a semblance of control.

The paradox of her resistance becomes evident in the image of Moira’s feet, specifically, which become an icon of hope, while simultaneously reminding women of Gilead’s power. The problem with Moira’s resistance is that it is individual—in the gymnasium, when Moira makes her escape, she must do it alone and at the expense of other women. Moira’s escape, therefore, plays into Gilead’s system of isolating women; there is no possibility of forming a community and escaping together. When she gets caught, the effect of her punishment is two-fold because Gilead not only claims her body but reminds other women of the consequences of resisting. Offred’s horror at the sight of her feet showcases how Gilead’s demonstration works to keep the rest of the women in submission:

Moira lay on her bed, an example. She shouldn’t have tried it, not with the Angels, Alma said, from the next bed over. . . . I am still praying but what I am seeing is Moira’s feet, the way they looked after they’d brought her back. Her feet did not look like feet at all. They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the colour. They looked like lungs. (Atwood 102)

Gilead reinstates its control by targeting the “nonessential”—and, ironically, most important—part of Moira. It is important to note that Gilead determines women’s feet as non-essential because they do not play any part in reproduction; by targeting the feet, Gilead reminds the women of their singular role for the state, and allows the state to literally destroy the one part of her body that could allow her to physically escape her oppression. In this way, Moira’s failure to run away makes the possibility of any woman being able to do so nearly impossible. However, counteracting the fear that Gilead elicits through its authoritarian tactics, is the comparison of Moira’s feet to lungs. By saying that Moira’s feet “look like lungs,” Offred emphasizes the requirement of the limbs and reinstates importance to the body parts that Gilead deems “not essential” (102). By comparing the feet to lungs, Offred advocates for the value of her life and of herself as an individual. In this way, Offred uses the image of Moira’s feet to remind herself of the vitality of escaping. As a result, Moira’s feet transcend her body and symbolize the value

of female life in Gilead. Her feet are not just Moira's, they are the feet of all the women who are captive in Gilead, and of all the female bodies that have been killed under Gilead's regime. Her feet remind Offred that escaping is not only an answer, it is a necessity.

Eventually when Moira escapes the gymnasium, she leaves as a martyr figure, embedding in her peers hope for freedom. Resistance feels possible because Moira proves to the Handmaids that their oppressors are not invulnerable, and that their "power had a flaw to it" (Atwood 143). Yet, once again, the problem of Moira's escape is that none of the other Handmaids were able to follow suit. The extent of Moira's resistance is that it becomes a "story passed among [the Handmaids]" that reminds them of the possibility of existing outside of Gilead (Atwood 143). It also becomes a major motivation in Offred's desires to resist later in the novel. Nonetheless, through the futility of Moira's resistance, Atwood reminds readers of the fundamental underlying neoliberal belief that keeps women trapped in Gilead. That is to say feminist resistance means nothing in Gilead unless the true obstacle is located: Offred ultimately (and coincidentally) locates the issue when she realizes that significant change cannot occur individually.

Motherhood & Eve-Complex: Jezebel's Selling of the Soul

In a story of parallels and narrative circles, it seems fitting that Moira ends up dressed in a parodic version of the tart, "teeter[ing]" (Atwood 254) in high heels, which "she always hated" (251). Here, again, the warning against her resistance rings clear: Moira attempted three times to heroically escape from Gilead and failed. The third time getting caught highlights an important warning to Moira's resistance; as a feminist, Moira is celebrated for her commitment of "self-definition, self-responsibility and independence from a collective identification with gender or feminism" (Budgeon 288); Gilead could not force Moira into the status of Handmaid, she took charge of her own situation by actively fighting back, and she refused to accept Gilead's definition of womanhood. However, the contradiction of her resistance is that ultimately, the only way for her to survive is to succumb to Gilead as an Unwoman and renegotiate a sense of freedom for herself.

For Moira, freedom is redefined in the form of remaining undomesticated by Gilead and refusing to partake in the recreation of Gilead. Jezebel's is an underground brothel that "acts as an escape from the self-imposed regulations on sex policed in the city;" the women who are brought here "are considered sexually deviant, too rebellious for 'domestication,' and forced to perform the roles of male fantasies" (Thomas 24-25). Similar to the Handmaids, women are given a choice—which is not much of a choice at all—where they can decide to either work at Jezebel's or be sent to the Colonies.³⁵ The name Jezebel's is of biblical significance, referring to the "Phoenician princess who worships Baal, the pagan god of fertility" and ultimately corrupts her husband, the king of northern Israel (Satchell). Religiously, Jezebel is a symbol of "sexual depravity" and the image of "a scheming, murderous vixen;" however, modern feminists view her as "a bloodstained yet strong-willed, politically astute, and courageous woman" who was scapegoated "as the primary force behind Israel's apostasy" (Satchell). It is no coincidence that the brothel Moira ends up working at is named after a woman who, arguably, remains loyal to her beliefs and is able to overturn the religion followed in northern Israel. On the one hand, her ultimate role as a prostitute in Jezebel's can be read as a form of resistance in itself because it gives Moira a semblance of agency and control over her own life.³⁶ As Offred subverted the dynamic between her and the Commander to establish control, so too does Moira. The existence of the brothel itself stands in opposition to Gilead's beliefs—it is a space for men to indulge in sex for pleasure, for

³⁵ Being sent to the Colonies means that women will spend a short lifespan cleaning up toxic and radioactive waste.

³⁶ Whether or not there is a difference in the terms "sex worker" and "prostitute" can be argued. One line of argument is that: "(1) prostitution is principally an institution of hierarchal gender relations that legitimizes the sexual exploitation of prostituted women by male buyers, and (2) sex work is a form of human labor where multiple forms of social inequality (including class, gender, and race) intersect in neoliberal capitalist societies" (Benoit, et al. 1973). The difference that is highlighted between the terms revolve around consent; prostitution implies a level of coercion, lack of consent, and reproduction of the patriarchy: (1) prostitution is a patriarchal gender relation; (2) prostitution entails the selling of women's sexual self, not their human labor; and (3) prostitution and trafficking are so closely linked that they are inseparable" (Benoit, et al. 1973).

I use the term "prostitute" here to demonstrate Moira's limited agency. By using her body for sexual means, she is able to gain a semblance of power by putting men in the position of wanting her. However, Moira does not have much choice. She was coerced into the brothel; selling her body is a means to keep herself alive.

women to play-act male sexual fantasies by dressing up and dressing promiscuously—and as such, it allows Moira to remain in opposition to Gilead as well. Furthermore, her role at Jezebel's allows Moira not only to reject the larger system, but she is also able to maintain a level of power that she would not have as a Handmaid. At Jezebel's, "the men ... surrender elements of power to the women by exposing vulnerability; in their attempt to fulfill their sexual fantasies, giving women a little more freedom from the restrictions imposed on them (Thomas 25). Unlike in Gilead where Moira would be forced into a heterosexual relationship and dominated by her Commander, Jezebel's allows her to express her sexuality and not be victim to any one man.

As a prostitute, Moira is no longer reproducing the system; outcast as an Unwoman, Moira will live out the "three or four good years" expected of her in "Butch paradise" (Atwood 261).³⁷ Here, Moira rejects the Eve-Complex by choosing to disavow motherhood entirely. To be a prostitute, she has to undergo surgery that removes her reproductive organs, thus the label Unwoman, and in this manner, she is also simultaneously rejecting Gilead's definition of womanhood by choosing not to be a fertile woman. Entirely disavowing the role of motherhood allows Moira to take a stand against the survival of Gilead. As a woman who was fertile, her refusal to submit to the Eve-Complex allows her to reduce the resources that Gilead needs to continue existing, and as such her actions threaten the very concept of reproductive futurity. On the other hand, the irony is that she has succumbed to the very forces she opposed:

Postfeminist popular discourses continue to suggest that feminism places limits on women's ability to construct their own identities in ways they feel best suit their circumstances. Being able to do so, however, does not necessarily stand as a form of feminist politics. (Budgeon 288)

The contradiction in Moira's rejection of the Eve-Complex is that she is stagnated in Gilead. Renegotiating her freedom meant that Moira "construct [her] own identit[y]" to what "best suit[s her] circumstances" (288); however, the very identity she formed was

³⁷ Although Jezebel's is tainted by the male gaze, and lesbian sex is an exploitation of it for the pleasure of men, it still allows Moira to keep that part of her, to subvert the role of performing sex for men to one that promotes her agency.

one that made her into a commodity for men. In this makeshift brothel, Offred realizes she has lost the role-model of rebellion to “indifference, a lack of volition,” a situation that eerily parallels that of Offred’s as a Handmaid (Atwood 261). It is significant that the costume Moira wears does not fit, and that it is similar to the aesthetic of the brothel itself. The lopsidedness of her image, including the “one breast [which] is plumped out,” the single floppy ear, and even the “teetering” of her walk, reinforces the image of something having been broken down, or in the midst of breaking down (Atwood, 251, 254). Moira’s appearance falls into the hands of Gilead; she has transformed into a parodic version of what she once stood against. Where Moira was once fiery with hope, her time at Jezebel’s has worn her down. Gilead has, inevitably, invaded her body.

Space: Words, Memory, Friendship

Despite Moira’s bleak ending, Atwood offers a glimpse of the potential that comradeship and collectivism could offer through Offred’s friendship with Moira. In considering the value and depiction of female friendship in Atwood’s novels, Jane W. Brown contends that the novels follow a model that “suggests the difficulty women face in attaining friendship and the tragedy that so many women seem to assign it so little value” (197). Offred, throughout the narrative, has the desire to forge friendships with the women around her, including the Marthas and the Wife (before she realized it was Serena Joy) and has faced the futility of doing so. Yet her friendship with Moira is one that stands the test of time. What makes Offred’s relationship with Moira different is that she is able to interact with her while in Gilead and her friendship with her was formed before she became a Handmaid. Unlike the rest of the people whom she loves (Luke, her mother, her daughter), Moira and Offred’s lives remain connected despite the changes around them. As such, what Moira returns to Offred (and what the Wives and Marthas cannot) is a remnant of her old life. Early in the novel, Offred utilizes the memory of her friendship with Moira to combat her current situation. Against the backdrop of her oppression, Moira is “something good” (47). When Offred feels suffocated by her uniform, reminiscing about Moira reduces her discomfort. Moira “breezing” into her room depicts the way the memory of her friendship offers Offred some relief in that it

sweeps away the solemnity of her situation and reintegrates feelings of pleasure and laughter (Atwood 65).

Knowing Moira's rebellious nature and witnessing the extent of her desire to revolt against Gilead makes her into a model of resilience and strength in Offred's mind. As such, Moira's memory becomes a space in Offred's narrative where she can vicariously take action, protest, and resist the system. When Offred's dissent against the system grows, she uses Moira to challenge and poke fun at the absurdity of Gilead's rules. When the Aunts speak about the uniforms, Offred offsets their words by remembering the phrases that Moira would use. When Aunt Lydia uses the term "*Unhygenic*," Moira's phrase "*crotch rot*" is immediately juxtaposed against it, which effectively challenges Gilead's rules and the perception of women's bodies (Atwood 72). Where Aunt Lydia preaches that the clothing allows women a way to remain minimal and clean, Moira's phrase focuses on the nonsensicalness and juvenility of the rule. Similarly, during "thanksgiving" when a Commander sings "There is a Balm in Gilead," before the daughter of Wives are sent off to get married, Offred remembers that Moira used to intentionally sing the hymn as "There is a Bomb in Gilead" (Atwood 230). By remembering Moira's parody during the Commander's speech just as the "Angels enter, newly returned from the fronts, newly decorated," Offred challenges the Ceremony itself (Atwood 230). Moira's words work as a way to question what exactly the nation is celebrating. Carla Scarano argues that Moira's interpretation of the hymn hints at how "Gileadean rulers will be punished in a way similar to how the Assyrian army carried out the punishment in Israel, because of their corruption and enforced rules they imposed on their citizens" (Scarano 597). By mis-singing the words, Moira indicates at a "revolutionary potential triggered by the oppressive regime" (Scarano 597).³⁸ This seems particularly true when Offred uses Moira's memory while the Angels are returning from their war and as the daughters are being presented to them as Wives. By timing her

³⁸ Refer to: Scarano D'Antonio, Carla. "The Handmaid's Tale: An Intertextual Transformation through Storytelling." *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2021, pp. 592–610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2021.1997484>.

memory this way, Offred provokes the idea that the real battle is between the Angels and daughters: the men and the women in Gilead.

As the voice of reason and truth, Moira's friendship presents the importance of female community. For Offred, her friendship with Moira protected her from falling prey to Gilead. When Aunt Lydia warns the Handmaids of what life used to be like for women by showing them "old porno film[s]" of women being tortured and abused, Moira challenges what was viewed by claiming, "it wasn't real, it was done with models" (Atwood 128). Interestingly, Offred admits it was "hard [for her] to tell" if it was real or not, indicating how the indoctrination was working (128). Although Offred didn't believe in Gilead, her time at the Centre was blurring her sense of what was real. Moira's voice tethers Offred to the present by challenging all that Gilead has taught her. In this way, what becomes evident is that the real threat for Gilead resides in collectivism. Arguably, Moira's friendship with Offred is even more prioritized in Gilead than with Offred and Luke because as a woman, she can give Offred what Luke cannot: point out the flaws in the system by calling Gilead out for its targeted oppression of women, and to motivate the will to assert herself and resist the impositions placed upon her. In the authoritarian world of Gilead, women are fractured and isolated from each other to ensure their submission; Offred and Moira's friendship counteracts this by providing each other what no man can: emotional understanding and a sense of self. Brown considers how the fracture in Offred's friendship with Moira portrays the difficulties of attaining friendship and argues that "Moira's fate [becomes] one more blow to Offred's hope for her own eventual escape" (206). I agree with Brown in that Moira's eventual downfall is a blow to Offred about the possibility of maintaining friendship in Gilead; however, I would argue that it is the loss of this friendship that emphasizes the importance of community to Offred. After Offred leaves Jezebel's and realizes that she will never see Moira again, her dissent with Gilead only increases. Although her eventual escape occurs by chance when she connects with the MayDay resistance group, the absence of Moira becomes a warning that Offred will not survive on her own. If there is a "Bomb" in Gilead, it exists in the form of female community.

Conclusion

In a state where the system actively attempts to erase female existence, *The Handmaid's Tale* determines the extent of what possible resistance could look like for women who are oppressed. However, Offred's passivity, Serena Joy's exploitation, and Moira's eventual submission in Jezebel's underlines the complexity of fighting against authoritative powers where resistance is weighted, oftentimes overwritten, by their complicity. What Atwood demonstrates in her novel is the very real, overlooked threat of what resistance can become when religious authoritarian regimes that have incorporated large systematic ideologies such as neoliberalism overtake the nation. By considering the inherent contradiction that exists in resistance, *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes much greater than a warning against a dystopian, religious regime overtaking the nation; the narrative asks us to understand the reality of the neoliberal system that underlies all aspects of our daily lives. Keith Booker contends in his book, *Dystopia*, "Atwood's central concern is to critique [Christian conservatism] as a current trend in American politics" (Booker 7). I argue that it is much larger than a single religious group— what *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights is the dangers of religion and politics merging. More specifically, I argue that Atwood recognizes the possible threat of religion integrating neoliberal ideas into its system to establish authoritarian control. What Atwood noticed with Thatcher and Reagan in the 1970s is that the United States is not excluded from the impending and inevitable threat of neoliberalism and religion converging. It is no coincidence that the novel focuses on reproductive rights, which was a prominent line of discussion in the 1960s and 1970s. What Atwood subtly points out with the regime of Gilead are the potential repercussions of aligning with the neoliberal ideologies that were being spread during that time.

The neoliberal influence in discussions on abortion laws becomes evident from the mid-1960s onwards, where committees like the American United for Life (AUL) began voicing their dissent against abortion rights. The AUL was "[f]ounded in 1971 by faith and conservative leaders in Chicago" ("Americans United for Life: Extreme. Toxic. Out of Touch"). Significantly, the cofounder of AUL, Dennis Horan, was a lawyer from the University of Chicago Law School, which is known for its prominent neoliberal

background (Karrer 536). According to Robert Van Horn, it was not only founded by corporations, but also advocated for a free-market ideology that “advanced a reformulated liberalism, ‘Chicago neoliberalism’” (Van Horn 485). What the AUL’s role in the discussion on abortion rights indicates is that there seems to be a direct connection between right wing anti-abortion propaganda and neoliberal economics.³⁹ *The Handmaid’s Tale* warns about the ways in which religion can embody and construe a regime that utilizes neoliberal ideas to remove people’s rights. Although defining Gilead as a neoliberal state is beyond the scope of this thesis, what I would like to highlight are the elements of neoliberal ideologies that complicate understanding of freedom, resistance, and power. Contradictorily, Brabazon argues that neoliberalism failed after the Global Financial Crisis, which is when a new enemy, women, came into being “to justify inequality” (151); however, I argue that despite neoliberalism’s public failure after Reagan, what becomes evident in Gilead are the internalized neoliberal ideas of freedom and individuality that quietly keeps women entrapped within a state of oppression. Referring to Hackworth’s understanding of how neoliberalism is utilized by Dominionist Evangelicals, I see a prominent message in *The Handmaid’s Tale* about the underlying forces that target and keep women oppressed.⁴⁰ Under the neoliberal framework, wealthy elites including religious parties who advocated for a neoliberal system, utilized the idea of individual freedom for their own gain, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* highlights the repercussions of doing so. In the case of the U.S., the AUL and New Right Leaders sold a particularly dangerous mantra that “called for a ‘return to basics’ and to the fundamentals of the heterosexual, nuclear, patriarchal family” which utilize elements of neoliberalism (Latimer 216). I consider figures such as Anita Bryant, or Tammy Faye Bakker, who were prominent figures for the New Christian Right, in particular because of the terminologies that they used to market their oppression. By using words such as choice and freedom, these women effectively created a way to rationalize a system of misogyny and patriarchy that would remove them of their rights; Gilead is the potential result. What

³⁹ It should be noted that I am not arguing that neoliberalism is the sole cause of antiabortion propaganda; rather, I am arguing that there is a significant neoliberal influence in the antiabortion movement that is worth examining.

⁴⁰ Refer to page 8 in Hackworth’s chapter on religion and neoliberalism.

becomes evident in Gilead, and why I have brought neoliberalism into conversation, is to demonstrate the ways in which the rhetoric of freedom and choice are also used to keep women, even in their attempts at resisting, trapped.

Abortion rights and reproductive politics are prime examples of how terminology, and neoliberal ideology mixed with religion, can be used to control women. A major pillar of Chicago neoliberalism is that it “sought to create a neoliberalism to countervail collectivism” (Van Horn 478). The individualistic component of neoliberalism is not only evident in anti-abortion propaganda, but its consequences lie in the depiction of Gilead’s regime when authoritarian forces take complete control over female bodies. For instance, “to avoid religious and even moral issues that might make their cause seem to sectarian,” some anti-abortionists resorted to using the Constitution to give foetuses personhood, and although they argued that every individual had the right to life and the freedom of choice, this argument excluded women (Ziegler 17).⁴¹ Women, too, during this time used this very appeal to argue that abortion violates “the right to life,” and it is a similar line of thought that Gilead uses to enforce childbirth (Ziegler 18). The problem with this ideology is that the “right to life” is at the expense of women’s lives; women are the sacrificed entity for the larger benefit of the state. As such, what the ideology really underlines is that “[p]rohibiting abortion is ... discussion about state power, not about individual rights or choices” (Martinez 608). Intermingling with religious groups, the belief that reproductive control is a moral solution for the betterment of the nation becomes difficult to argue and disentangle, and this is what Atwood cleverly demonstrates in her novel. In Gilead, the women are not only most targeted, but systematically isolated from each other so that even their ideas of freedom and resistance become convoluted. As Janna Harner claims: “*The Handmaid’s Tale* asks readers to recognize that ‘Gilead is within you’ ... not in the future, but the present, and there it will rest eating away until a final act of rebellion” (Atwood qtd. in Harner 29). Atwood makes

⁴¹ Some antiabortionists “like Joseph Witherspoon, an NRLC member and professor at the University of Texas at Austin Law School, relied on the Thirteenth Amendment, a provision that had outlawed slavery. Witherspoon claimed that the framers of the amendment had recognized that slavery had denied men their rights as fathers. Witherspoon asserted that Roe similarly stripped fathers of protected rights. Others argued that the Declaration of Independence and Fourteenth Amendment implied the existence of a fundamental right to life for unborn children” (Ziegler 25).

the same remark through her narrative by showing how neoliberalism is still here. By creating a regime that pervades all aspects of women's individual lives, Atwood demonstrates the pitfalls of following, and the near impossibility of fighting against, "the God that failed" (Monbiot). To an extent, Atwood is right: *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a feminist novel; rather, it is a narrative that examines what happens to women when religion and neoliberalism take over.

Reading the novel as a post-apocalyptic fiction is vital because it reveals the extent to which the system is reproduced into imagined futures, and why female bodies are targeted as the most valuable commodity. Built on an inherent contradiction, Gilead ensures its own future by locating it in female bodies. Brent Bellamy's "reproductive imperative" showcases how women become central figures in the post-apocalypse because the burden of reproducing humankind is placed on them. He contends that "this form of futurism takes a political question about the collective destiny of humanity and turns it into an ethical or moral question in the lives of individuals" (46). In the neoliberal sense, the reproductive imperative creates a debt system, which "is one of the mechanisms" used "in a dynamic that reflects how the apocalyptic sense of an ending gives shape to time and provides a comforting narrative by deterministically closing off contingency" (De Cristofaro 135). By making pregnancy the only option for the survival of Gilead, and then utilizing authoritarian tactics so that pregnancy is the only option for women to survive, Gilead enforces and controls motherhood on its own terms. However, the reproductive imperative is much more complicated than controlling the female population and ensuring a future for humankind past the apocalypse; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the imperative becomes a method to ensure the creation and recreation of neoliberal and totalitarian regimes. Reading the novel in a post-apocalyptic context becomes all the more important because it highlights how easily religion and neoliberal ideologies can mutate into an institution that entirely destroys the way of life, especially for women; Atwood predicted this in 1985 when she published *The Handmaid's Tale*, and her predication stands true to this very day.

In a modern context, reading Offred's resistance reveals the inherent contradiction that lies in resistance. Whereas prior to her oppression, Offred's pacifism was seen as political inactivity and passivity, in states of oppression this very behaviour becomes

necessary for her to maintain her agency. Offred's pacifism and passivity is the "interiorized affective space" that works "from within to penetrate not only the intimate links between subjects but also the relationship of the individual with him/herself" (Rottenberg qtd. in Genz and Brabon 17, Genz and Brabon 18). Through her silence, memory, pacifism, and subversion of gaze, Offred maintains a relationship with her identity prior to Gilead. Moreover, she utilizes these internal spaces to combat Gilead's control over her body and reassert herself in her present world. Offred is not changing her world, but the value of her resistance is just as significant. Offred does not have space to fight against the evasive and permeating system of Gilead; to stand blatantly against it results in death, which is demonstrated through the Particicution and the Salvaging, amongst many other examples. Gilead is everywhere, and Offred on her own cannot defeat it. Yet, Offred is overturning little moments in her daily life to push against her oppression. Changing her world, even if momentarily, is enough in her present to continue fighting for herself.

Moira's resistance begins loudly but ultimately succumbs to the larger systemic powers she opposes. Where she began as an individual adamant on fighting for her rights, Atwood shows the way this fight is slowly beaten out of her as the opposition becomes larger and more invasive. Moreover, what becomes evident in the change of Moira's trajectory is how the neoliberal idea of individualism and self-accountability ultimately lead to her downfall; seeing Moira at Jezebel's is "frightening" because Offred cannot recognize the person she has become (Atwood 261). The system of Gilead has pervaded her body and mind so that becoming a prostitute at Jezebel's not only becomes the only other possibility but is rationalized as the best possible outcome. Here, again, Atwood defines the dangers of following a system that depends on individual bodies as commodities. Gilead relies on their isolation; without Moira and Offred's friendship, there is no real possibility of escape. This becomes particularly evident when Offred's escape occurs because of her connections with other women within the MayDay resistance group. In a system that thrives on isolation, collectivism seems to be the only solution to counteract it. Atwood may be critiquing feminism and resistance, but the novel is also bringing to light the bigger, unspoken question, which is to ask who the real opposition truly is.

The Wives in this manner present yet another paradox that hinders the potential for women to unite and dismantle an oppressive and violent system controlling their lives. Where Gilead exploits female relations by pitting them against one another, the Wives also thrive on this hierarchy. Millet argues that “[o]ne of the chief effects of class within the patriarchy is to set one woman against another” (Millet 38). The caste system in Gilead effectively isolates and removes women from each other to reduce the threat of communion, but what becomes most evident—and what is most interesting—is in the ways the Wives rely on this very separation to indulge in their power. Serena’s power is reliant on Offred’s oppression. To physically abuse Offred, to impose and control on her day-to-day life, and to be complicit in her oppression keeps Serena in her position of power. Serena’s infertility plays a large part in her desire and ability to transcend her role as simply the housewife into the authority that the men have. Unable to fully connect with her feminine biological identity, unless she becomes a mother, Serena must use her circumstances to align with her male counterpart. I use the term counterpart instead of oppressor because Serena showcases how her identity as the Wife enables her to be the Commander’s comparative equal. Her resistance—that is, her active role in engaging in violence, utilizing silence, and subverting space, to continuously assert her agency and presence—demonstrates how her marginalization is not all that it seems. Serena complicates the idea of resistance when she not only believes and propagates Gilead’s ideologies, but because her survival occurs at expense of other women. As problematic as her perception of resistance might be, ultimately, blackmailing, abusing, and being consciously (and actively) complicit in women’s oppression allows Serena to reassert her individuality and subjectivity. Yet, what Atwood so subtly explores is the danger that Serena poses to herself and other women. Serena resists by being able to “construct [her] identity, express [her] agency and actively self-govern in spite of structural/collective barriers” (Genz and Brabon 16-17). The problem is that it is this very resistance that entraps her “in a kind of prison of activity, without that entailing real political involvement” (Genz and Brabon 8). What Serena considers power, ultimately, only hurts her and others; where she believes she is making an autonomous and voluntary decision to be a part of Gilead, she is only a function that continues its recreation. Her challenging the Commander can only exist within the bounds of her house, and unless she becomes a

mother, she will not receive the life that she was promised and for which she advocated for Pre-Gilead.

The paradox of choice and life begins to make much more sense when considering how it benefits the system. Fighting for the right to life for fetuses, as that Marina Martinez points out in her article “Life-protecting Neoliberalism”, is that it is at the expense of women’s lives. In her case study of Chile—a nation which was violently taken over by neoliberalism—she argues how the implementation of the death penalty against abortion indicates an economic agenda that sacrifices the female body for the presupposed potential of an unborn life. What Martinez’s observations highlights, and what is evident in Gilead’s regime, is the inherent paradox of life, choice, and freedom. Offred realizes this because as a Handmaid she has no real choice or political voice: what matters most to the state is that she produces a child. In the case of pregnancy, her unborn child’s life will be of more value than her. What Gilead demonstrates is that how “abortion laws position the foetus’s rights as the state’s rights” and that mothers are only offered “a margin of choice at most” (Latimer 222). The discussion on abortion is about life, choice, and freedom, but whose it is remains unclear. Gilead reveals plainly that “women are not only adversely related to the foetus, or to the future child, but are actually much less politically important” (Latimer 220). The paradox, of course, is that in order to obtain a child, women are invaluable. Like Gilead, Chile uses the rationality of freedom of choice, life, and privacy to advocate for the control over female reproduction; to ensure the protection of unborn life, the state makes abortion a criminal act worthy of the death penalty. Here, again, Martinez points out a vital technicality in the language of pro-life ideologies: “Clearly, what is at stake here is not any right of the foetus but rather its life. The foetus is not treated as a legal subject, but as an impersonal carrier of a good to be protected: life itself” (602). In a state threatened by a growing infertility rate, pregnancy becomes glorified; children are the most valuable because they signify the continuation of Gilead. The contradiction is that “[t]he woman’s capacity to ‘give life’ makes the protection of future life a threat to her” (Martinez 606). Bellamy’s concept of the reproductive imperative highlights how women are simultaneously marginalized from the narrative while also being a necessity for a future beyond the apocalypse, but it does not delve into how these conditions affect female identities. *The Handmaid’s Tale* takes

place from the perspective of women who are marginalized, and in this way, provides a framework to investigate how neoliberal ideologies misconstrue, invade, and control the identity of motherhood so that women become complicit in their own oppression.

Offred combats the control over her body by distinguishing between the Eve-Complex and motherhood. She recognizes that, as a Handmaid, her reproductive abilities are owned by the state and anything she produces will only recreate Gilead. By separating motherhood from the Eve-Complex, Offred reinstates agency in her own life and over her own body. Despite being a Handmaid, her identity as a mother motivates her not only to fight for her survival but to remember that freedom is not what Gilead deems it is. As such, she is able to keep herself from fully succumbing to the state even while she is a part of it. With Serena, acknowledging the Eve-Complex forces her to recognize the limits of her power. Using the gardens to enact maternal care towards the tulips emphasizes that Serena recognizes she will never truly be recognized by Gilead as a mother, and simultaneously her garden becomes a place where she verbalizes the true extent to her powerlessness. Moira, on the other hand, entirely disavows the motherhood identity and the Eve-Complex by “choosing” to become an Unwoman. I put quotations around the word “choose” because how much of Moira’s decision it was is questionable. However, rather than becoming a Handmaid, becoming an Unwoman allows Moira to physically sever the possibility of reproducing Gilead, and in so doing, she refuses to allow the state to use her body as a commodity.

Under the broad genre of speculative fiction, Atwood’s bold claim that “[b]ooks don’t save the world” feels particularly resonant (*Waltzing Again* 3). On the surface, her claim falls in line with the passive stance she takes when categorizing her novels. By denying any active decision to make a political or feminist statement, Atwood’s fictions become observations that are open for interpretation. Although I personally stand on neutral ground with regard to Atwood’s stance, I will add that the themes books comment on do have the capacity to change the world for the better. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for instance, provides a framework for the effects of feminism in an oppressive, totalitarian regime. Where Atwood’s novel may seem imaginative and fictional, the regime of Gilead does not stray too far from reality. In fact, the events of *Roe v. Wade* in America reveal that aspects of Gilead already exist. What Atwood—whether intentionally or not—

demonstrates in *The Handmaid's Tale* is that women have always been fighting. The futility of resistance may seem tragic—the Historical Notes section in *The Handmaid's Tale* explores this very phenomenon when the records of Offred's story are mistranslated by male academics in the post-Gileadean world—yet what Offred's recordings suggest is the complex ways in which resistance can manifest. For Offred, recording women's stories and subverting spaces of absence into places where female existence can survive, she effectively reduces Gilead's attempt to eradicate women from history. Mistranslated or not, her recollection of female experiences in Gilead's history can be read as a symbol of retaliation against her oppressors; she has successfully managed to assert her identity and agency through storytelling. Considering the end of the novel, Nakamura's words ring true in that there is no prevailing victory for these women—ultimately, the women's resistance isn't truly resistance at all. Yet, by showcasing how women continue their fight, even where there is no room for them to do so, Atwood defines the potential of women and the importance of women in history. Each attempt that Offred, Serena Joy, and Moira make to fight against their oppressors reveals a weakness in the system. Offred and Serena's use of storytelling creates space for them to challenge the laws propagated by Gilead. Questioning what they are being told by the state tears down the façade of Gilead's power and allows the women to remind themselves of the fragility of their oppressors. Expressing or inhibiting their sexuality and subverting their roles allows them to assert their subjectivity and individual identity within oppressive relationships. Serena Joy's exploitation of power allows her to create the illusion of asserting her authority. In all of their attempts, the women attempt to defy the system by not only bending the law, but by refusing to be erased from the picture.

The forms of resistance that Offred, Serena, and Moira enact to counteract the oppressive forces of Gilead align with a history of women who have been forgotten or thrown into the background. What Atwood targets in her novel is not simply the effects of extremist religious parties overtaking a nation, but the underhanded control of neoliberal systems. Furthermore, Atwood also provides a potential alternative within the failure of feminism in the novel itself. As Mottahedeh remarks, the appearance of neoliberal regimes “is symptomatic of a melancholic failure to reclaim as our own the most fundamental loss, a loss that if recognized would effectively transform all of us. The

loss, to name it, is that of true kinship—of an encompassing human solidarity” (Mottahedeh 104). Similarly, what is evident in Offred’s record of her life in Gilead is the absence of community. What is filled within the absences in the novel is the potential for something different, something the system does not want individuals to fathom, and something that dispels the possibility of freedom in women. Atwood’s appropriation of various cultures and experiences undeniably raise questions as to her perception of a future in the United States and whom that involves, but it also points a clear finger towards the greater political opposition that resides quietly behind the scenes.

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