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Hannah Gallant

Andrews University, hannahg@andrews.edu

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Recommended Citation

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/honors/240/>

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J. N. Andrews Honors Program
Andrews University

HONS 497
Honors Thesis

The Blame Game: Complicity and Rape Culture in Margaret Atwood's Novel and Hulu's
Adapted Series *The Handmaid's Tale*

Hannah Gallant

April 29, 2020

Advisor: Dr. Vanessa Corredera

Primary Advisor Signature: Vanessa Corredera

Department of English

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the Hulu award-winning televisual adaptation (2017-Present) portray a dystopic, theocratic regime known as Gilead. The regime's focus on female bodies and reproduction exemplifies what feminist theorists call rape culture, a culture Gilead perpetuates through sexual violence, rape, and surveillance. Using critical race theory, media and close-textual analysis this project examines both works, arguing that complicity within the novel must be discussed in relation to rape culture and that while the series accounts for rape culture, it problematically manifests a type of feminism that privileges white women over women of color.

INTRODUCTION

In our modern world, we frequently hear about sexual violence. With the growth of the #MeToo movement, stories of celebrities, authors, and athletes revealing their experiences with sexual harassment and abuse pepper news reports and magazine articles. University campuses hold Title IX assemblies, addressing the various manifestations of sexual misconduct. Court trials continue to occur due to surfacing allegations of harassment and rape. While these examples show people speaking out, we still remain far from treating sexual violence in an ethical and just manner. In each of these scenarios our society blames someone; however, more often than not, we blame and shame the victims. We continue to search for ways to delegitimize rape, broaden the definitions of consensual sex, promote hegemonic masculinity,¹ sexualize and objectify women, and police female attire. This is rape culture.

Similarly, Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), portrays a rape culture as well—a dystopic, theocratic regime centered around female bodies and reproduction.² Within this regime, those in power use biblical terms and stories to disguise and “justify” sexual violence, rape, continuous surveillance, and restricted female existence and sexual expression. Indeed, this is a rape culture too. Conversations about women living within rape culture often concentrate on their supposed complicity or resistance to their surroundings. Sadly, this approach commonly appears in typical scholarly responses to the novel—specifically in regards to Offred's complicity. Although this view does not deny the presence of sexual violence, it can lead to harsh critiques of Offred's

¹ In her book, *Masculinities* (2005), R. W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77).

² Notably, Atwood relied solely on historical precedence when designing Gilead. In other words, she only used events that had happened at some point in history. She writes in her introduction to the novel, “If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted all the toads in it to be real. One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the ‘nightmare’ of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities” (XIV). While Atwood drew from countless historical periods, two of the most influential sources were “Puritan Boston of *The Scarlet Letter* and modern Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini” (Kauffman 235).

complicity without addressing the presence of rape culture. A more accurate assessment of Offred's complicity, I argue, must examine the presence and ramifications of rape culture in the Gileadean society—particularly the way “divine authority” and biblical references obscure its appearance throughout the novel. This approach allows for an evaluation of complicity that does not participate in assigning blame or victim shaming; rather, it examines how Offred subverts total complicity through acts of micro-resistance.

Throughout its three seasons, the Hulu Primetime-Emmy and Golden-Globe-winning television show (2017-Present) of the same name also addresses complicity, albeit through a much more noticeable acknowledgement of rape culture. The first season is based primarily on the novel; however, the next two move beyond the novel, asserting new plotlines that further complicate the way the characters are both complicit and resistant.³ While the series does offer a corrective to the blind spots of the novel by explicitly acknowledging the discourse and presence of rape culture, it has its own weaknesses, namely ignoring that rape culture does not play out the same for all women. In this case, the show fails to note how rape culture has been racialized, affording white women a level of privilege that is not given to women of color. This is particularly seen through the actions of the two main white women within the show, June Osborne (Elisabeth Moss), the Handmaid, and Serena Joy Waterford (Yvonne Strahovski), wife of Commander Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes). Thus, I will examine the complicity of June and Serena Joy as white women within the Gileadean society, paying special attention to how this impacts their actions as both the oppressed and the oppressors. Throughout the seasons, both characters effectively resist Gilead's oppressive treatment of women; however, they do so in ways that often harm women of color or utilize their white privilege to work with those in power above them. Thus, their resistance involves complicity within

³ In an interview for *The Art and Making Of The Handmaid's Tale: The Official Companion to MGM Television's Hit Series*, Atwood notes that “He [Bruce Miller, executive producer] and his team have also respected the basic premise: nothing goes into the show that does not have a precedent in history or elsewhere on the planet” (10).

a system that oppresses persons of color. Examining their white privilege within this rape culture is therefore necessary for an ethical consideration of their complicity and resistance within the television series. This analysis does not deny that June and Serena Joy are victims of rape culture; rather, it calls for a more nuanced consideration of how their actions affect the other women within Gilead. It also requires us as scholars and viewers to acknowledge how the series problematically manifests a type of feminism that prioritizes white women over others, even within rape culture. Placing the novel and the television series in conversation with each other presents scholars, readers, and viewers with a chance to interrogate larger systems of oppression—patriarchy, misogyny, and white supremacy. Noting the presence of these systems within both works allows us to then take steps to eradicate them within our current culture and in the art that we consume.

SCHOLARLY RESPONSES TO THE NOVEL

As formerly noted, many scholarly articles focus on Offred's complicity or resistance within Atwood's novel. Arguments for Offred's resistance often analyze her use of language, the emphasis on memories, and the act of recording her story as proof of this resistance.⁴ On the other hand, scholars regularly cite Offred's passivity, victim mentality and existence, her lack of obvious action, and the pressures of her extreme environment as evidence of her complicity.⁵ Allan Weiss extensively reviews these examples in his article, "Offred's Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2009). After establishing the broad range of scholarly voices, he analyzes Offred's actions in the context of the larger dystopian tradition and ultimately concludes that "Like the dystopian protagonists who provided the models for her characterization,

⁴ Scholars who view Offred as resistant include: Arnold E. Davidson in "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1988), Michele Lacombe and "The Writing on the Wall: Amputated Speech in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1986), and Jeane Campbell Reesman in her essay "Dark Knowledge in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1991)

⁵ For further arguments for Offred's complicity see the following articles: "'We Lived in the Blank White Spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1997) by Danita J. Dodson, "Subject-Position as Victim-Position in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1994) by Jamie Dopp, and "'The Missionary Position': Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1993) by Sandra Tomc.

Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concerns” (138). Furthermore, Weiss critiques the idea of degrees of responsibility by stating that Offred is “no less responsible” than those holding higher positions in the regime’s government. To a lesser degree, Shirley Neuman echoes Weiss’ argument for complicity in her essay, “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism and *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (2006). In this essay, she examines Offred’s “willed ignorance” in her response to the feminist movement in the pre-Gileadean society and also to the lived realities of the regime. While Neuman does posit that Offred speaks out by utilizing “her uncertain freedom to tell her story,” she calls for resistance through increased awareness and vocal critique of social circumstances (86). In their essay, “Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Peter Stillman and S. A. Johnson also discuss complicity and resistance within the Gileadean regime. They depict the regime as actively erasing personal identity and prohibiting subversive acts; however, by contrasting Offred’s actions with that of Moira and Offred’s mother, they still argue that Offred’s behavior fails to resist the regime’s pervasive power. Furthermore, Stillman and Johnson consider how resistance should manifest not only in Gilead, but also in women’s reactions to our modern and future societies. Altogether, these readings illustrate the consistent pattern in scholarly responses which position Offred as complicit within the Gileadean regime.

Although these readings of Offred’s complicity take sexual violence, erasure of subjectivity, and the continual surveillance and regulation of female bodies into account, they continue to fault Offred as complicit without critically addressing the way that rape culture complicates this debate. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth define rape culture as an environment where “women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm” (qtd. in Harding 3). Carrie Rentschler provides another helpful definition of this term as one that “targets the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the

perpetration of sexual violence” (67).⁶ This definition aptly draws attention to rape culture as a series of acts and “practices” which reinforce an overarching misogynistic ideology that “normalize[s] sexual violence” (Fraser 143). In her book, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture—and What We Can Do About It*, Kate Harding provides several examples of the manifestation of rape culture, most notably how it “encourages us to scrutinize victims’ stories for any evidence that they brought violence upon themselves” (4). Indeed, this victim blaming response takes numerous forms such as critiquing the victim for their clothing choices at the time of assault, faulting them for their level of intoxication and physical resistance, and judging them based on their previous sexual encounters (Harding 12).⁷ Analyzing these responses reveals how rape culture is created and maintained within society. Irina Anderson and Kathy Doherty provide a helpful overview of the methods feminist theorists adopt in their analysis of rape culture. These methods include addressing how all sexual violation “function[s] to humiliate and induce fear, constraining the activities and choices of victims and reassuring perpetrators of their potency” (21), centralizing “the social definition of rape and rape victim-hood” (22), and examining the role of language in denoting and producing rape culture (125). This project uses these methods to explore the presence and construction of rape culture within Gilead.

Indeed, the Gileadean regime functions as a rape culture, as evidenced in its reliance on rape and other acts of sexual violation to consistently and effectively dehumanize, control, and objectify

⁶ Rentschler also explains the origin of this term, noting, “The term was first articulated in Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will* in 1975 as ‘rape-supportive culture,’ the 1975 documentary ‘Rape Culture,’ and later in the 1993 anthology *Transforming a Rape Culture*” (66-67).

⁷ Anderson and Doherty provide key statistics from an Amnesty International Survey (2005) which affirm the prevalence of victim blaming in our current society: “...of the 1,095 adults interviewed, 22% of the respondents thought that the woman is at least partially or totally responsible for the rape if she were alone in a deserted spot at the time of the attack. The same number of respondents thought that she is partially or totally responsible if she has had many sexual partners. Thirty per cent of respondents thought that woman is partially or totally responsible if she was drunk at the time of the rape, 37% thought the same if she failed to say ‘no’ clearly enough and 26% thought that she is partially or totally responsible if she was wearing revealing clothing at the time of the rape” (3). These statistics also support Harding’s overview of the reasons why individuals blame victims for their rape.

the Handmaids. As such, Gilead creates a “continuum of threatened violence” which utilizes religious jargon in a toxic attempt to justify its own forms of “physical and emotional terrorism against women” (Harding 3). In this way, Gileadean rape culture participates in what Roxane Gay calls “the criminal language of sexual violence,” otherwise known as the use of language to portray and propagate views of rape that separate the speaker from the violent reality of rape (136). Notably, within this theocracy, the entire power structure misappropriates biblical characters and concepts as a way of providing “divine endorsement” for their regime, particularly the treatment and rape of the Handmaids. This understanding portrays the regime’s actions as ethical, helpful, and protective whereas all acts of resistance are viewed as statements of defiance against the regime, and more importantly God. Consequently, this approach participates in the insidious perpetuation of rape culture wherein a society primarily places responsibility on the victim instead of the system. Overall, Gilead actually presents a more toxic representation of rape culture where this attitude appears not only “as the norm,” but becomes institutionalized to a degree that not only forces this view on the minds of women, but also honors and celebrates it.

Equally important, a scholarly analysis of rape culture within Gilead benefits from a set understanding of the terms “resistance” and “complicity.”⁸ Although many definitions of “resistance” exist in the Oxford English Dictionary, two definitions—“the action of resisting, opposing, or withstanding someone or something”⁹ and “the power or capacity to resist something”¹⁰—prove useful in this context. While the first definition portrays a commonly understood view of *resistance* that requires successful and strong opposition, evidenced by the word

⁸ Typically, scholars define these terms by contextualizing them in relation to the novel instead of presenting dictionary entries. For example, Shirley Neuman portrays Offred’s complicity as resulting from her “willed ignorance” and “passive acceptance of blame” within the pre-Gileadean regime. Furthermore, Allan Weiss references a typical depiction of resistance as being a “valiant rebel challenging the regime’s domination and oppression” (120). He also conflates complicity with being “a willing or unwitting participant” (120).

⁹ (“Resistance” def. 1a)

¹⁰ (“Resistance” def. 3a)

“withstanding,” the second definition complicates this by drawing attention to an individual’s capability for resistance. This interpretation aids the discussion of resistance in Gilead because it moves the focus from Offred’s success or failure to a larger analysis of how the system defines and limits her “power or capacity.” Given this explanation of resistance, complicity is not Offred’s personal failure, but rather a natural reaction to the inescapable power of Gilead’s institutionalized rape culture. Similar to *resistance*, the OED contains many definitions for complicity including as the “state of being complex or involved.”¹¹ This description acknowledges involvement, particularly its complexity, but does not take an overtly negative or judgmental approach to complicity.

Contrastingly, a different entry describes complicity as “being an accomplice; partnership in an evil action.”¹² This interpretation glosses over the nuanced nature of complicity and instead elevates it to the level of “being an accomplice.” Although this might benefit broad discussions of complicity, it casts the Handmaids as partners with the regime rather than recognizing how it enforces rape culture by employing the language of blame. In light of these definitions, a critique of Offred’s behavior should only happen after carefully examining the structure and consequent overwhelming power of the Gileadean regime.

RAPE CULTURE WITHIN THE NOVEL

This critique of the novel begins with a critical analysis of the patriarchal system within Gilead—particularly how the hierarchical power structure utilizes biblical terminology to reinforce authority. Some of the most notable examples of this emerge in the names for male roles such as “Angels,” “Guardians,” and “Commanders of the Faithful.” These titles evoke images of power and responsibility, specifically the moral superiority and importance of these figures in maintaining order and ensuring the survival of the Gileadean regime. Furthermore, the novel refers to male informants

¹¹ (“Complicity” Def. 2)

¹² (“Complicity” Def. 1)

as “the Eyes.” In her essay, “Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (1995), Pamela Cooper notes, “Typologically the Eyes suggest the vengeful, ruthless omniscience of the God of the Old Testament—an omniscience revised” (50). This explanation of “the Eyes” shows further evidence of how the Gileadean regime misconstrues divine authority as a tool for perpetuating their male-dominated society. On another level, this emphasis on male power becomes even more problematic after examining the names of stores such as “Lilies of the Field,” “Milk and Honey,” and “All Flesh.” While these phrases indicate the types of merchandise available in the stores, “Lilies of the Field” also references the Beatitudes and “Milk and Honey” alludes to the biblical description of the promised land. Within the context of the Beatitudes (Matthew 6), “Lilies of the Field” describes how humans need not worry because God cares for his creation. Furthermore, the phrase “milk and honey” represents God’s promise to provide a fertile land for the Israelites (Exodus 3:8). Both of these biblical examples portray God as the provider; however, the Gileadean regime positions men as the providers, protectors, and defenders of these biblical ideals. Consequently, the men become “God” figures who use scriptural precedent to wrongly support and justify their treatment and portrayal of women.

Continuing in this hierarchical tradition, the titles assigned to female roles reaffirm the patriarchal theocracy by representing the various portrayals and conceptions of women within the regime. Cooper helpfully articulates this view:

In the absolute majesty of this God and his Old Testament deputies, the patriarchs, resides also the gender politics of the fundamentalist republic: the subservience of women—their restriction to the domestic sphere and classification in terms of childbearing abilities—reapplies ancient models of sexual differences and masculine imperative. (50)

These ideas manifest in the descriptions of females as Handmaids, Unwomen, Aunts, Marthas, and Wives (Commander’s Wives and Econowives). The term *Handmaid* explicitly defines women in

terms of their fertility and sexual service to men, whereas *Unwomen* describes those who serve no sexual, pleasurable, or fertile purpose to men. In this way, both terms exemplify Cooper's description as "classification in terms of childbearing abilities" (50). Correspondingly, *Aunts* refers to the women who perpetuate this patriarchal classification by policing other women, specifically the Handmaids. In referring to these women as *Aunts*, Gilead attempts to imbue their role with a sense of familial power and responsibility for and over the Handmaids—even though the Aunts themselves are infertile. This appeal to family is yet another method through which to convince the Handmaids and others of the legitimacy of the Gileadean regime and its practices. Similarly, the Gileadean title for female domestic servants, *Martha*, alludes to the biblical story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) in which Martha concerns herself with domestic chores while her sister, Mary, listens to Jesus instead. In the novel, Offred describes, "the Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us" (11). This quote illustrates not only the low opinion of Marthas, but also Cooper's point that the patriarchy restricts women "to the domestic sphere" (50). Moreover, the other terms, *Commander's Wives* and *Econowives*, define women only in their relation to surrounding males. Each of these titles signify how Gilead's dominant patriarchal values translate into the generalized labeling of women with non-descript, problematic titles. Notably, Handmaids undergo another level of "naming" that completes the elimination of their personal names by replacing them with names such as "Offred," "Ofglen," and "Ofwarren." Comprised of the word "of" and the first name of whichever Commander they happen to serve (i.e. Offred's name also reads as "of Fred"), these words resemble the form and purpose of a patronymic. Traditionally, patronymics show lineage and descent; however, the Gileadean variation of this takes a much more extreme approach that explicitly labels the Handmaids as male property. This completely erases female identity and reaffirms the Handmaid's sole reproductive purpose to Commanders. In doing so, Gilead dehumanizes the Handmaids, using male power to strip away female identity by defining them

exclusively with terms originating within the patriarchal, totalizing discourse. These actions pave the way for rape culture within Gilead as it keeps Handmaids from even being considered human and thereby from also being victims of rape.

As already noticeable in the literal naming and categorization of female roles, the Gileadean regime regularly reduces women to objects through its discourse, thereby completing the erasure of their subjectivity and reaffirming its treatment of women. During one of her reflections, Offred describes how she and the other Handmaids “are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (96). Later on, she reiterates this idea as “We are for breeding purposes...We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (136). Within both of these quotes, four different descriptions of Handmaids emerge: “containers,” “wombs,” “vessels,” and “chalices”—all of them objects. Each of these phrases also directly reflects the Handmaids’ responsibility to remain fertile and successfully bear children. Furthermore, “sacred vessels” and “ambulatory chalices” also contain religious language which positions them within the rest of the biblical jargon that Gilead uses throughout the novel. Indeed, the specific usage of “sacred” reflects the false sense of honor bestowed on the Handmaids only because of their fertility. Aunt Lydia explains the logic behind this “honor” in a lecture to Handmaids where she states, “A thing is valued,’ she says, ‘only if it is rare and hard to get...Think of yourselves as pearls” (114). At this stage in Gilead, fertility appears almost exclusively in the Handmaids due to the previous sterilization of other women and the toxic effects of the environment. This explains why the Handmaids hold a position of honor in the society; however, this honor comes attached to perpetual objectification and an exclusive focus on their reproductive capabilities. Furthermore, this mentality allows the Commanders, and others, to ignore the humanity of each Handmaid when committing acts of sexual violence. This illustrates part of the aforementioned definition that “a rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women” (Harding 3). By denying the Handmaids’

humanity, Gilead sidesteps the ramifications of committing both physical and emotional terrorism against these women and instead reframes its actions as mere rituals conducted for the sake of fertility. In other words, describing Handmaids as objects reinforces the power of Gileadean rape culture and reveals the extent to which it controls female bodies and their usefulness.

Building on the categorization and objectification of women throughout the novel, the “ceremony” represents the culmination of rape culture’s existence within Gilead. Before each ceremony the Commander reads certain passages of scripture to his entire household: Wife, Handmaid, Martha(s), and Guardian. Some of these passages include God’s instruction to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” in Genesis 1:28, and the story in Genesis 30:1-3 where Rachel tells Jacob to bear children with her maid, Bilhah.¹³ The entire purpose of Offred’s existence directly responds to this command to “be fruitful and multiply” by requiring that the Commander attempt to impregnate her every month. During this experience, the Commander’s wife, Serena Joy, lays behind Offred, holding her hand while the Commander rapes her. Offred explains, “This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product” (94). By placing Serena Joy in a position of control, the ceremony echoes the control that Rachel shows when she tells Jacob her idea. Consequently, the entire structure of the ceremony closely follows “biblical instruction” as an explanation and justification for raping the Handmaids.

Indeed, Gilead further “justifies” their treatment of the Handmaids by convincing them that they chose their position. Offred reflects this belief when she chooses not to describe the ceremony as rape. Her description reveals how the patriarchal power of the regime has policed and regulated her existence to such a degree that she ceases to see herself as a victim of the rape culture. After

¹³ Genesis 30:1-3 is cited in the novel’s epigraph and referenced again on page 88, which also includes a quotation of Genesis 1:28.

attempting to define what happens in the Ceremony, she says, “Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (94). Her belief reveals how she has accepted the indoctrinated lie propagated by the Aunts at the Rachel and Leah center and widely circulated within the society that being a Handmaiden is an honorable choice. As Stillman explains, “...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). Similarly, Offred’s attempt to choose her identity as a Handmaid merely casts her into a category of women violated because of their fertility. Apart from this, Offred could only “go to the Colonies’...with the Unwomen” (Stillman 10). Both of these options ensure that her body perpetuates the existence of Gilead either through producing children or performing manual labor to improve the environment for future citizens. Altogether Gilead uses these fake options to effectively indoctrinate the Handmaids and even position them as “willing” participants in their own oppression.

This forced involvement continues with the various examples of violence that the Handmaids witness or participate in. These examples include public executions, displaying hung bodies, and Gileadean specific salvagings and particutions—terms denoting Gilead’s practice of requiring the Handmaids to collectively beat, hang, or otherwise mutilate offenders until they die. Within the novel, salvagings happen separately for both men and women; however, Atwood only focuses on female salvagings. A bell summons the Handmaids to these periodic salvagings in which they each participate by holding the rope that chokes a woman charged with a crime against the regime (276). Consequently, this action becomes a public display of the regime punishing deviance while at the same time requiring obedience and complicity from the Handmaids. After their death, the victims of both male and female salvagings hang on a Wall that most citizens must walk past on their way to perform their responsibilities. Offred describes her and Ofglen’s actions as they return

from their daily shopping: “We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are here for, hanging on the Wall” (32). In this particular instance, Offred further postulates that the bodies are most likely doctors or nurses who used to perform abortion services (33). In other words, these bodies violently demonstrate the fierce hold that Gilead maintains over fertility and therefore the Handmaids.

Another example of this is the particution in which Offred, and the other Handmaids, surround and murder a man “convicted” of rape. Meanwhile, Aunt Lydia observes them, directing their actions with the blow of a whistle (278). This scene becomes the ultimate example of the regime’s ability to “redefine” rape by creating a rape culture which publicly shames their ideal definition of rape, i.e. a man pursuing any sexual relationship which violates Gilead’s strict rules. In publicly punishing this man’s actions as an example of forbidden sexual behavior and casting it as a horrendous act of rape, Gilead successfully draws attention away from its own instances of rape—the monthly ceremonies with the Handmaids. Through this careful construction and redefinition, Gilead effectively misuses biblical concepts, violence, and sustained policing of behavior to create a rape culture that keeps individuals like Offred under its control.

In light of this violence and Gilead’s reconfiguration of rape, Offred’s very position within Gilead affirms her complicity; however, this complicity occurs as a result of her erased identity rather than as evidence of her explicitly supporting the regime. This hearkens back to the previously stated definition of complicity as the “state of being complex or involved.” Similarly, Offred definitely involves herself within the rape culture by fulfilling the responsibilities of a Handmaid; but, to see her complicity as anything other than this definition implicates her as guilty in her own rape, as if somehow, she “asked for it” (Harding 22). On the contrary, Gilead’s overpowering patriarchal policies of erasing female subjectivity through categorization, objectification, and the public display of the violence in response to deviance creates an environment that keeps Offred

caught in its clutches. Stillman posits, “Gilead’s political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, utilizes repressive laws and politics, and is solidified by the isolation of each woman, the fragmentation of her social world, and the reconstruction of each woman’s world into Gilead’s mold” (75). Indeed, Offred’s personal identity exists only in her ever-fading memories, which, in conjunction with the regime’s extensive manifestations of power, leads to her “reconstruction...into Gilead’s mold.” Linda Kauffman notes this reconstruction, adding that Gilead’s “traffic in women eliminates female personality; she [Offred] merely becomes an interchangeable unit in the body politic” (232). Thus, any assessment of Offred’s complicity that does not adequately consider Gilead’s ability to erase her identity and force her actions essentially perpetuates rape culture’s frequently repeated mantra: “blame the victim for their rape.” In light of this, I reiterate my argument that an appropriate response to this situation redefines Offred’s complicity by revealing how it stems naturally from the repressive regime and contrasting its existence alongside her acts of micro-resistance. Ultimately this places the blame where it belongs—on Gilead—and recognizes Offred’s resistance, albeit small and largely ineffective.

RESISTANCE WITHIN THE NOVEL

Throughout the novel, Offred consistently uses her own body to express resistance against the Gileadean regime.¹⁴ At the beginning of the novel, Offred acknowledges the “power” of her body, specifically as a way of controlling the Angels: “Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (4). Here Offred positions her body as an item to “be exchanged”—a demeaning position but one that recognizes the

¹⁴ Other examples of Offred’s resistance include: exchanging names with the other Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah center (4); repeatedly reading the words inscribed in the pillow and the corner of the desk (52); acknowledging the existence and significance of her name (84); talking to Moira through a hole in the bathroom wall (89); forming a subversive friendship with her walking partner, Ofglen (168); reading with the Commander and asking him to share knowledge of Gilead (184, 188); and continuing to sleep with Nick after fulfilling Serena Joy’s orders (261). Due to the scope of this paper, I will not address and analyze the scholarly debate surrounding each of these instances; however, regardless of one’s position, each of these scenarios involves Offred directly doing something that is not permitted in Gilead.

small amount of power inherent in her body as a commodified item. In other words, Offred attempts to reclaim her body as her own. This approach appears again when she raises her head to let a guard see under her veil. “It’s an event, a small defiance of rule...but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself...such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes” (21). By referring to her action as a “reward” Offred associates these acts of micro-resistance with the notion of hope and resilience. While altogether ineffectual and unnoticeable against the regime, Offred’s use of her body provides her with an outlet for resistance. Shortly afterwards, Offred walks past two other guards: “I know they’re watching...I move my hips a little...I find I’m not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there” (22).¹⁵ Here, Offred again refers to her use of her body as “power.” In noting its passivity, however, she shows self-awareness about the futility of her resistance attempts. Despite the futility, Offred’s intentional use of her body as a sexual object to elicit a physical reaction from the guards nevertheless operates in direct opposition to Gilead’s strict control over the Handmaid’s bodies and their uses.

Offred continues to exemplify resistance in the very act of recording her story. By relating her entire narrative, the story contextualizes her moments of complicity and resistance within an account that thoroughly traces her various reactions to Gilead’s oppressive society. In her article, “Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias” (2000), Ildney Cavalcanti argues, “Despite the extremely limited political impact of her narrative effort...June/Offred contests the linguistic tyranny of Gilead and inscribes, in this case, ‘speaks’ her own authority in, over and through language” (169). This explanation admits the limitations of Offred’s resistance but does not discredit it by holding it to an unrealistic standard of achievement. In other words, Cavalcanti’s

¹⁵ This happens later in the novel as well when Offred uses her body to arouse a guard. She writes, “Did the sight of my ankle make him lightheaded, faint at the checkpoint yesterday, when I dropped my pass and let him pick it up for me? No handkerchief, no fan, I use what’s handy” (154). This moment serves as another reminder of how, within Gilead, Offred’s body operates as something to be used to further Gilead’s reproductive purposes while at the same time functioning in her hands as a means for acts of micro-resistance against the regime.

understanding of resistance takes Offred's "capacity to resist"¹⁶ into account. Kauffman takes a similar approach, noting how Offred uses this act of recording as a means to "reclaim herself, retrieve her voice" (227). Kauffman also positions Offred's narrative as one that "tries to bring into being a nonexistent archive of women so as to memorialize, for history, the women she will never see again...the entire narrative is a polyphony of distinctive female voices" (227). Thus, through recording her story, Offred not only exhibits personal resistance but also a commitment to other women impacted by Gilead. This commitment becomes a tangible platform through which to guarantee that these women's experiences are neither forgotten nor ignored. In doing so, Offred creates a record to stand in opposition to Gilead, one that, even if inadvertently, reveals the Gileadean rape culture and attempts to memorialize its effects on her and other Handmaids.

Approaches such as Cavalcanti's and Kauffman's present a method of discussing Offred's situation that uplift her resistance efforts and cast blame on the Gileadean regime. In noting Offred's resistance, albeit limited, these scholars avoid the very victim blaming that perpetuates rape culture. Instead, they recognize how Gileadean culture, what I am framing as rape culture, affects her attempts, thereby drawing more attention to the very systems that created it. David Hogsette invites readers to adopt this same approach, calling them to become "Offred's narrative audience" (273). He then describes what this looks like:

As members of her audience, we must learn to adopt a compassionate stance toward Offred. In so doing, we join in her struggle and begin to learn how 'to whisper without sound' (4) and to reach through the darkness of oppression and across textual space in order to engage in Offred's developing political activism. (274)

¹⁶ Refer to the previously quoted OED's definition of resistance.

By advocating for compassion and solidarity, Hogsette eliminates any opportunity to shame or blame Offred and instead invites scholars and readers to position themselves alongside her. Furthermore, his quote “to whisper without sound” refers to the textual moment where the Handmaids try to share their real names without being caught. This scene perfectly exemplifies an act of micro-resistance against Gilead’s attempts to erase the women’s humanity and categorize them as objects of use for the patriarchal hierarchy. Overall, Hogsette’s approach beautifully presents an alternative reading of Offred’s story that refuses to participate in the perpetuation of rape culture by emphasizing her humanity. Likewise, this same approach should appear in our scholarly responses to Offred. In highlighting her acts of resistance and placing the blame where it belongs—on Gilead—we end the vicious cycle of victim-blaming which keeps oppressive systems, such as Gilead, alive. Thus, we play a crucial role, as scholars and readers, in not only recognizing the rape culture within Gilead, and in our society as a whole, but also advocating for a response that ends rather than furthers oppression.

INTRODUCTION AND SCHOLARLY RESPONSES TO THE TELEVISION SERIES

As readers of Offred’s resistant narration, however limited it might be, we see how Gileadean rape culture relies on biblical jargon to empower its totalizing, patriarchal regime which objectifies, categorizes, and defines women solely by their ability to reproduce. Similar to the novel, the Hulu adapted television series, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, adeptly depicts the horrors and hierarchies present within Gilead. Due to its televisual medium, however, the series moves beyond the novel, asserting new plotlines that more explicitly note the presence and ramifications of rape culture. The television series does this through several means, most notably in its depictions of the intersection between Gilead’s religious and political values, the physical and emotional toll of the regime, and key rape and sex scenes. As a result of its increased portrayal of and attention to rape culture, the

television show lends itself to more open conversations regarding Offred's¹⁷ (really called June) complicity and resistance within the Gileadean regime. Indeed, in highlighting the pervasive nature of Gilead's rape culture whilst uplifting June's resistance, the series invites viewers and scholars to reconsider their approach to June's complicity. The series thus provides a corrective to June's passivity and ambiguous depiction within the novel, offering instead a more nuanced lens through which to approach questions of complicity and resistance within systemic oppression. Despite its success in depicting the Gileadean rape culture, however, the series falls short in applying this thoughtful attention to its treatment of race. In doing so, it problematically depicts a post-racial Gilead, a narrative and representational decision which fails to meaningfully account for the way that the show consistently privileges whiteness and does not hold June accountable for her treatment of characters of color. Noting this failure presents scholars and viewers alike with a chance to confront this racial oppression and take steps to resist it, both through critiques of the series and increased attention to this oppression within our own society.

As a relatively new cultural product currently in production for its fourth season, the Hulu television series has limited scholarly responses to its name.¹⁸ However, within the existing academic analysis, scholars have been direct in noting the television series' increased awareness of and transparency in highlighting the presence of rape and its role within Gilead.¹⁹ As such, they avoid the pitfalls of victim blaming evident in typical scholarly responses to Offred in the novel. These

¹⁷ While Offred is still referred to with her patronymic by most characters within the television series, she does reveal that her name is June at the end of Season 1 Episode 1. For the rest of this paper, I refer to her as June when addressing her actions within the television series. As the series goes on, June becomes a Handmaid for another Commander and her patronymic changes from Offred to Ofjoseph. Thus, referring to her as June not only reasserts her humanity but also helps minimize the confusion caused by this name change.

¹⁸ While there are numerous non-academic articles and reviews addressing the television series, this section will focus on providing an overview of the peer-reviewed scholarly responses. The non-academic sources will appear at various points throughout this paper as applied to more specific strains of my argument.

¹⁹ Two particularly notable sources of these academic responses are the *Media and Extreme Right*, a special issue of *Communication Culture & Critique*, which published a forum of responses to the television series, and *The Handmaid's Tale: Teaching Dystopia, Feminism, and Resistance Across Disciplines and Borders*, a newly published collection of essays containing numerous scholarly responses to and critiques of the series.

responses to the show instead examine the way that Gilead creates and sustains its oppressive political regime. Alison Trope notes the role of rape within Gilead, arguing that the regime “validat[es] rape as a functional necessity for sustaining humankind” (186). Michelle Cubellis carries this argument further, positing that rape within Gilead functions both as a means to procreate but also to perpetuate the subjugation of the Handmaids (79). She makes this distinction by addressing the “sterile nature of many Commanders” which “emphasizes the importance of the sexual assault to maintain control over Handmaids and ensure their continued submission” (79). Additionally, Cubellis acknowledges the series’ nuanced and multifaceted depictions of rape—depictions which “present a unique opportunity to address common misconceptions about rape, force, and consent” (83). Hunter Hargraves reiterates the series’ consistent focus on rape, noting how “almost every episode features a rape of some sort, even if that assault is coded through compliance, coercion, and bodily mutilation” (191). This attention to the numerous ways that the series presents rape allows for a more open discussion of Gileadean rape culture. Thus, the series resists the ambiguity present within the novel and instead firmly reminds viewers of the underlying ideology of rape, violence, dehumanization, and subjugation. Consequently, the series “functions as an anatomy of ideology, exposing the process by which one constructs, psychologically and politically, subjects of the state, and then enlists their cooperation in their own subjection” (Kauffman 234). While originally applied to Atwood’s novel, Kauffman’s concept of “anatomy of ideology” aptly articulates the television series’ more direct portrayal of Gilead’s rape culture. Indeed, this more noticeable framework resituates conversations surrounding the Handmaid’s complicity whilst also directing our attention to increased examples of their individual and collective resistance.

RAPE CULTURE WITHIN THE TELEVISION SERIES

In order to carefully consider the television series’ depiction of rape culture, it is important to first analyze how the show establishes rape as both a political and physical act. In this twofold use

of rape, Gilead uses the physical, dehumanizing effects of rape on the Handmaids to simultaneously uplift the political power of the Commanders. Here, it bears repeating Harding's understanding of rape culture as a "continuum of threatened violence" which "condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm" (3). Within this "continuum," rape operates not only as an act of physical violation and "terrorism" but also a method through which the Gileadean regime enforces its own political goals.

This attention to the political nature of rape illustrates how political power can be used in violent and abusive ways to perpetuate rape culture. In *Not That Bad*, a newly released collection of essays on rape culture edited by Roxane Gay, So Mayer argues, "Rape was and is a cultural and political act: it attempts to remove a person with agency, autonomy, and belonging from their community, to secrete them and separate them, to depoliticize their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing" (140). Within this passage, Mayer notes how rape culture is inherently political, but in a way that intentionally "depoliticize[s]" the victim's body. The Oxford English Dictionary offers two helpful definitions of political as "Of, belonging to, or concerned with the form, organization, and administration of a state, and with the regulation of its relations with other states"²⁰ and "A political exile or prisoner; a victim of politically motivated state harassment."²¹ According to these definitions, rape within Gilead is political because it concerns "the form, organization, and administration of a state" (Def. 1a). This is seen in the way that Gilead treats fertility as a national resource by requiring fertile women to serve under the control of the state. The second OED definition is helpful in the sense that June, and the other Handmaids, become "victim[s] of politically motivated state harassment." As such, the rape that the Handmaids experience is a political process, one that exists in order to serve the interests of Gilead. This

²⁰ ("Political, adj." def. 1a)

²¹ ("Political, n." def. 2c)

process, however, ensures that this political power is only given to certain individuals within the regime since rape subjugates the Handmaids and prevents them from holding any political power. In other words, they are, as Mayer notes, depoliticized through the act of rape (140). As defined by the OED, this depoliticization means that the physical body is “remove[d] from the sphere of political activity or influence.”²² Consequently, as imagined objects in order to justify rape, the Handmaids are unable to take part in the “sphere of political activity or influence.” Within Gilead, this means that the Handmaids have no agency to actively resist rape or initiate political change within the regime. By situating rape as a political act that relies on the violent depoliticization of its victims, Gilead therefore establishes itself as a rape culture.

Within the first episode of the television series, the depiction of the monthly rape ritual firmly solidifies the Gileadean use of rape as a political act that relies on scriptural precedence for justification. In order to reveal this, I describe the physical details of the scene at length to demonstrate how the series intentionally aestheticizes and politicizes the rape ceremony as a disturbing ordeal. The scene begins as the members of the Waterford house gather in the sitting room, lit by the soft, yellow glow of several lamps. This lack of a visible overhead light source and reliance on lower levels of lighting creates a falsely intimate tone. The lighting, partnered with the familial setting of the sitting room, builds on this, casting viewers into a sense of security grossly at odds with the upcoming rape. The scene continues, adding music as Commander Waterford walks into the room, pulls out his key, and unlocks the box on the mantel holding the Bible. After several shots of him reading, the scene shifts to a close up of June’s face and upper torso, moving on the bedspread as the Commander rhythmically thrusts. Simultaneously the music, a choral version of “Onward Christian Soldiers”²³ with organ accompaniment, switches from instrumental to lyrical, as

²² (“Depoliticize, v.”)

²³ Performed by the Joslin Grove Choral Society

the choir sings, “Onward, Christian soldiers! / Marching as to war, / With the cross of Jesus / Going on before / Christ, the royal Master, / Leads against the foe.” Partway through, viewers hear Waterford’s voice reading from the scripture passage: “She [Leah] said behold my maid, Bilhah. Go in unto her, that she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.”²⁴ As he reads, the camera’s focus moves to Waterford, his hand on his hips, capturing the mechanical movements. The music continues to build until Waterford climaxes, grabbing the bed post in a jarring gesture as the music ends abruptly. These lighting, setting, and music choices all accrue to deliver an aesthetically pleasing yet incredibly upsetting depiction of the rape scene that stresses Gilead’s efforts to make these ceremonies a familial and “biblical” experience. Indeed, by juxtaposing a violent act of ritualized rape with the sounds of “Onward Christian Soldier,” the scene expressly conflates the religious with the political. It compares rape to a military conquest, one bolstered by religious precedence and maintained through ritualized sexual violence. Like the Christian soldiers who go “Marching as to war, / With the cross of Jesus / Going on before,” Waterford boldly rapes June, armed with the Gileadean “cross of Jesus”—a blatant misuse of the story of Leah and Bilhah. Through these lyrics, the scene refuses to let viewers forget Gilead’s dependence on the Bible as justification for its political agenda, an agenda reinforced and maintained through rape. In doing so, the series resists any ambiguity present within the novel, forcing viewers to confront the truly insidious nature of Gilead’s rape culture.

While the series consistently emphasizes how Gilead uses rape to uphold its hierarchical structure, it also reveals Gilead’s reliance upon other methods, such as architecture, to reinforce its radical politics. This is particularly evident in the depiction of Gilead’s capital in Washington D.C. Here, Gilead has co-opted cultural monuments and turned them into symbols of the regime,

²⁴ Genesis 30:3 (KJV)

symbols which highlight Gilead's mobilization of scriptural precedence as a driving force behind its oppressive and totalizing political actions. When June and the Waterfords travel to D.C., they gather in front of the Lincoln Memorial (S3E5). As she approaches it, viewers see that Lincoln's top half has been destroyed, leaving only the legs.²⁵ The camera then pans out across the National Mall, revealing that the Washington monument has now been turned into a cross.²⁶ In a review of this episode for *Harper's Bazaar*, Emma Dibdin notes how Warren Littlefield, the executive producer of the television series, describes these changes as "radical visualization," ones which give viewers "a sense that everything has changed in Washington without requiring much expository dialogue" (n.p.). Dibdin points out the significance of the Lincoln Memorial as a symbol of "freedom and emancipation" that has been destroyed, signaling to viewers that "those values, and what's on those walls, are no longer relevant" (n.p.). The destruction of this cultural touchstone of "freedom and emancipation" applies in a broad sense to Gilead's oppressive regime; however, it also reveals the regime's blindness to the nation's history of racism. In obliterating this particular monument, Gilead thus signifies its own distance from acknowledging and engaging in these conversations. Instead, it boldly exhibits its own radical politics as evidence in the Washington monument as a cross. This overtly religious, phallic symbol asserts Gilead's exploitation of the Bible as justification for the rape, oppression, and violence. As such, this episode reveals the pervasive nature of Gilead's rape culture, a culture so entrenched that it manifests in the literal restructuring and destruction of national monuments.

In addition to the rape ceremonies and the visible presence of Gileadean ideology evident in the architecture of the capitol, the television series clearly details the political regime's wider physical violation of the Handmaids. Here, it bears repeating Anderson and Doherty's argument that within

²⁵ See Figure 2 in Appendix 1 (pg. 57)

²⁶ See Figure 3 in Appendix 1 (pg. 57)

rape culture, these violent acts “humiliate and induce fear, constraining the activities and choices of victims and reassuring perpetrators of their potency” (21). Indeed, these consistent portrayals of violence unsettle viewers, forcing them to confront how Gilead effectively uses violence to not only “constrain” its victims but also to uplift the “perpetrators” by severely limiting the Handmaids’ capacity to resist. Throughout the three seasons, Handmaids suffer from tasing, burning, and other violent actions including kicking and hitting. Gilead also physically mutilates them by removing their eyes, tongues, and performing a clitoridectomy. In an especially horrific moment, June observes that Handmaids in D.C. are required to wear tightly fastened muzzles that prohibit them from speaking (S3E5). When one of the Handmaids removes her muzzle, June realizes that her mouth has been stapled shut. This maiming exposes the degree to which the Gileadean regime literally silences the Handmaids, removing their ability to speak out in resistance. Furthermore, the widespread examples of physical violence against the Handmaids exemplifies the aforementioned definition that rape culture “condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm” (3). The television series not only displays this “physical terrorism” against the Handmaids as evidence of Gilead’s rape culture, but it also portrays Handmaids, when possible, speaking out against this treatment. In one such significant moment of resistance, June catalogues the abuse to a visiting Mexican ambassador:

This is a brutal place...We’re prisoners. If we run, they’ll try to kill us. Or worse, they beat us. They use cattle prods to try to get us to behave. If we’re caught reading, they’ll cut off a finger. The second offense, just the whole hand. They gouge out our eyes. They maim us in worse ways than you can imagine. They rape me, every month, whenever I might be fertile...I didn’t choose this. They caught me. I was trying to escape. They took my daughter. So, don’t be sorry. Okay. Please don’t be sorry. Please do something. (S1E6)²⁷

²⁷ All quotes from the television series are author transcription.

This scene is not only significant in its detailed description of Gilead's use of physical violence, but also in how June explicitly states that she "didn't choose this" and that she is raped. These statements do not appear in the novel, making the change here especially notable. In providing a blunt description of the treatment she and other Handmaids experience, June forces viewers to account for the multifaceted and inhumane nature of Gileadean rape culture. However, rather than stop here, June uses this moment to call the ambassador to political action in an attempt to galvanize support for resistance. Thus, her individual response becomes part of a larger narrative of resistance, both on an individual and political level. Even as the series continually reveals how Gilead uses rape as both a political and physical act, then, it also reminds viewers that resistance can operate on these fronts as well. Consequently, this moment serves as a meta appeal, one that reaches beyond the ambassador to urge viewers to not only identify how Gilead uses violence to perpetuate its rape culture but also to collectively resist its effects through both physical and political means.

The series' increased attention to and explicit depiction of the regime's physical violation of the Handmaids creates a foundation from which to explore the emotional and psychological impact of the Gileadean rape culture. Across the three seasons, there are a range of moments where June and the other Handmaids experience significant affective distress and hysteria as a result of the oppressive conditions. Some of these instances include Nick's²⁸ warning to June that everyone breaks down (S1E1), Emily's²⁹ jarring scream and visible distress after her clitoridectomy (S1E3), June's hysterical breakdown in the back of the car returning from the doctor's office (S1E4), June's panicked spiral of self-blame for not initially sharing the truth with the ambassador (S1E5), June crying as Waterford rapes her at Jezebel's (S1E8), and the Handmaids' responses to their faux hanging in Fenway Park (S2E1). Whether spurred by severe punishments, threats, physical violation

²⁸ Nick Blaine (Max Minghella) serves as a Guardian and Commander Waterford's driver for the majority of the series' three seasons.

²⁹ Emily Malek (Alexis Bledel) is one of the other major Handmaids (Ofglen and later Ofstevan) within the series.

or the overall effect of the regime, each of these instances further establishes rape culture as a negative, dehumanizing, horrific reality.³⁰

This exploration of the emotional and psychological impact of the regime is only strengthened by the television show's frequent use of close-ups.³¹ While most often utilized in depictions of June, these shots appear consistently throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, regularly going below a Handmaid's restrictive veil to show her face, framed by the white borders of the veil.³² This intimate portrayal is in itself a kind of resistance, a way of granting viewers unfettered access to the Handmaid's emotions. Julia Leyda writes about the use of close-ups in the television show, noting:

The series adds visual immediacy to the dystopia, conjured in the source text, not only through painterly frame compositions of Gilead's color-coded sumptuary laws and militarized tyranny, but also through prolific use of the close-up (in conjunction with voiceover) as a correlative to the privileged access granted by the novel's first-person narrator. (180)

This "privileged access" to June's private thoughts and emotions therefore gives the viewer a chance to see her raw response to Gileadean customs. By focusing the camera on June's facial expressions and her eyes, the viewer sees an often unsettling and yet intimate portrayal of June's response.

³⁰ In Season 3 Episode 1, Commander Joseph Lawrence (Bradley Whitford) notes, "Part of the equation we overlooked, mental health, obviously...maternal love, we overlooked that one, too. So many regrets." In admitting this to June, Lawrence acknowledges the affective toll that Gilead has on the Handmaids.

³¹ Defined as a camera shot where "a face or other body part takes up most of the frame" (Leyda 180).

³² Due to the series' consistent use of close-ups, the lens most commonly used for these shots was "a special 28k lens for the Canon K35." Because of its frequent use for filming close-up shots of Elisabeth Moss, the lens came to be known as "'The Lizzie Lens'" (Robinson 37).



Figure 1: Screenshot from Season 1 Episode 6

Figure 1 exemplifies this, centering June's face in the frame and using bokeh to blur out the landscape. This moment happens in a sequence of scenes where June and the other Handmaids clean blood off a wall in preparation for a visiting dignitary. Here, June's facial expression reveals her exhaustion and defeat as she participates in this forced attempt to cleanse the literal evidence of Gilead's physical treatment of dissenters. Even as the blood is washed off the wall, its presence is still clearly visible on June's face. With everything but June's face blurred in the background, this shot focuses all the attention on her facial expression. This moment, captured between others of cleaning the blood off the wall, compels the viewer to confront the affective results of Gilead's treatment of the Handmaids, thus making it impossible for them to observe the visual horrors of Gilead from a distance. Rather, shots like this direct the viewer's gaze to the personal—the eyes and facial expressions of the Handmaids—drawing attention to their response within the dehumanizing and oppressive environment. Indeed, this filming technique “usefully captures the hostile nature of the social environment that many rape survivors experience” (Anderson & Doherty 10). The

evidence of this “social environment” thus reveals, yet again, how Gilead is, in fact, a rape culture. In drawing attention to the Handmaids’ experiences and response to this environment, the use of close-ups not only captures the existence of Gileadean rape culture but moves beyond to capture the extent of its impact.

The series also notes the complexity and nuanced nature of Gileadean rape culture through its careful juxtaposition of several sex scenes: a flashback to a pre-Gilead consensual encounter, two rape scenes, and a consensual yet problematic scene between June and Nick. These scenes all occur within one episode (S1E5), giving viewers and critics a unique opportunity to note the progression between and accrual of details in each scene. Examining this progression reveals a distinct contrast between consensual sex and the complex layers of sexual assault and coercion within Gilead’s rape culture. The first encounter, a flashback, shows June meeting and having an affair with Luke Bankole (O. T. Fagbenle), at that time a married man. They meet in a hotel room, bathed in natural light from the window as Luke intentionally asks June if she wants to have sex. After she agrees, they kiss, and June reveals that her preferred sexual position is to be “on top.” While not his preference, Luke concedes. In highlighting June’s request and Luke’s concession, the scene reverses the male dominant, female submissive power dynamic present in June’s rapes and instead prioritizes her pleasure. The scene closes as June enthusiastically kisses Luke, further reinforcing her consent and sexual pleasure. As Luke and June begin to undress, the scene jumps to the present with June and Serena Joy in Nick’s apartment. Serena Joy watches as Nick rapes June, per Serena Joy’s request. In contrast to June’s enthusiastic engagement with Luke, here June lies passively, avoiding eye contact with Nick and gazing around the room. The darker lighting and minimal dialogue between characters continue to distance this scene from June’s earlier encounter with Luke. Furthermore, Nick’s mechanical movements and Serena Joy’s presence as an uncomfortable witness further amplify the differences between the scenes. Here, Serena Joy serves as a literal figure representing

the complex power dynamics within Gilead, power dynamics which she employed as the Commander's wife to force Nick to rape June. While Serena Joy's order does not absolve Nick of his actions, it draws attention to the layers of coercion within the Gileadean hierarchies—layers which fundamentally rely on the continued subjugation of the Handmaids through rape. Pairing these two scenes explicitly reveals the difference between consensual sex and rape. Furthermore, June's passive response to the rape forces viewers to consider a spectrum of responses to rape, responses which do not imply consent. Cubellis addresses this dynamic: "Although the instances of rape...do not feature overt physical violence, they are still clear instances of rape. The lack of physical force...does not, in any way, suggest that Handmaids are consenting to the sexual assault, but instead emphasizes the importance of coercion in rape" (83). The difference between June's enthusiastic engagement and clear consent with Luke versus her uncomfortably quiet, passive response to Nick confirms Cubellis' point. Thus, in juxtaposing these scenes, the series provides an unambiguous example of consensual sex against which to measure the Gileadean encounters.

The series continues its multifaceted depiction of rape and coercion in a more explicit pairing later in the episode between another ceremony scene and a sexual encounter between June and Nick. The ceremony scene presents a resistant response to rape while the moment between June and Nick investigates the complexities inherent in attempting a consensual sexual encounter within Gilead. The ceremony scene occurs shortly after Nick rapes June. During this moment, Commander Waterford intentionally makes eye contact with June and moves his arm down her thigh as he rapes her. This marks a significant breach from the traditionally mechanical, distanced movements present in both the previous ceremonial rape and the aforementioned rape with Nick. June responds to the Commander's actions in a panicked and visibly distressed manner. In a voiceover she says: "Stop it. Don't look at me like that. Stop it." June's firm "Stop" strongly removes any hesitation regarding her consent and clearly casts this moment as a horrifying act of violation. Following this scene, viewers

witness as Nick apologizes to June for raping her, explaining how he was unable to refuse Serena Joy's order. In acknowledging and expressing remorse for raping June, Nick not only condemns his own actions but also notes the problematic power dynamics that led to it. His apology sets the stage for his and June's consensual encounter at the end of the episode. The filming techniques in this scene highlight its sensuality and explicit nature, as evidenced by full nudity, soft, yellow lighting, and quick camera cuts that emphasize Nick and June's nakedness and sexual experience. Notably, the episode ends with June moving on top of Nick and her subsequent orgasm. This action harkens back to June's earlier statement to Luke where she revealed her preferred sexual position. Not only does this scene give her that opportunity, but it depicts her resulting pleasure in ways that have heretofore been absent in the television series.³³ Mike Barker, director of this episode, says, "I loved shooting the sex scene...it was the first real moment of freedom and personal empowerment [for June] when she rolls on top...It had been ritualistic rape up to then, so to have this glimmer of hope and humanity in the middle of it for me was really exciting" (Robinson 85). This emphasis on June's pleasure and sexual preference firmly casts this as a consensual experience. Also, because Gilead provides no access to sexual pleasure for the Handmaids, this scene becomes a point of resistance, an opportunity for June to actively choose and participate in a sexual encounter. Even in its consensual nature, however, this moment still operates within the oppressive, coercive regime. Nick raped June, thus leading viewers to question June's decision to pursue a sexual encounter with him. Nevertheless, this moment, along with the others, reveal the series' commitment to illustrating a complex depiction of sexual encounters within Gilead. Combined with the explicit portrayal of the regime's political structures, physical violation of the Handmaids, and their ensuing emotional and

³³ This unprecedented depiction of June's sexual pleasure with Nick, while resistant, is nevertheless troubling. In emphasizing the romantic and sensual nature of this scene, the series places a higher significance on their encounter than June's pre-Gilead encounter with Luke. Thus, it unnecessarily romanticizes this scene, failing to adequately account for the scene's inescapable enmeshment in Gilead's oppressive, coercive hierarchical structures.

psychological trauma, the series illustrates Gileadean rape culture in a multi-dimensional manner not present in Atwood's original novel. This complex depiction of Gileadean rape culture sets the groundwork for a more informed and understanding approach to June's resistance and complicity within the regime.

RESISTANCE & FEMALE COMMUNITY WITHIN THE TELEVISION SERIES

Altogether, the television series consistently notes the resistance efforts against the Gileadean regime in a much more noticeable way than Atwood's original novel. As stated above, this allows for a reexamination of Offred's supposed complicity within the regime—an approach that acknowledges the aforementioned complex nature of Gileadean rape culture and how it impacts the Handmaids. Thus, while the novel also depicts resistance, the enhanced story line and televisual medium of the series allows it to move beyond the novel and assert a multiplicity of reactions against Gilead's totalizing and oppressive rape culture. This not only results in a more hopeful depiction of June's response to the regime, but also moves the conversation away from her supposed complicity and more towards the effectiveness of her oppositional efforts. June's individual examples of resistance include multiple attempts to escape, emphasizing her own personhood and identity, recruiting others to defy Gilead, sharing her story, and participating in the resistance movement known as Mayday. In highlighting this broad range of attempts, the series establishes a consistent pattern and catalogue of June's challenges to the regime. This fundamentally changes viewers' perceptions of her character, firmly casting her as a defiant protagonist rather than a passive, complicit figure.

The television series fully commits to this resistant characterization of June, inscribing her defiance against the regime as a foundational through line in each of the series' three seasons. One of the first notable examples occurs at the very end of Season 1 Episode 1. June sits in the windowsill of her room at the Waterford house, bathed in natural light, the camera providing a

close-up on her face and eyes. In a voiceover she says, “Someone is always watching. Nothing can change. It all has to look the same. Because I intend to survive, for her. Her name is Hannah. My husband was Luke. [Music that had been building stops here]. My name is June.” Immediately following this moment, the screen fades to black, the credits begin to roll, and Lesley Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me” (1963) starts to play. June’s words not only indicate her intention to survive, but also assert her humanity. In telling us her name and the names of her husband and daughter, June forces the audience to see her as more than patronymic, a womb in service of Gilead. The lyrics to Gore’s song reinforce this sentiment, declaring, “You don’t own me / I’m not just one of your many toys / ...Don’t tell me what to do / And don’t tell me what to say / Please, when I go out with you / Don’t put me on display.” While not entirely applicable to the dynamics present in Gilead, these lyrics depict a woman resisting a man’s attempts to objectify and control her. In their strong denial of male ownership and commodification, these words forcefully renounce the very methods Gilead uses to silence and subjugate June and the other Handmaids. By playing this song after June asserts her humanity and intent to survive, the series contextualizes her statements as distinctly resistant against the regime. While present, her attempts are nevertheless limited. June notes this when she states that “someone is always watching.” In doing so, June realizes that she must proceed carefully. First and foremost, she desires to survive. Though limiting, this does not negate her opposition; rather, it reminds viewers of the significance of her decision to push back in the midst of Gilead’s pervasive dehumanizing and oppressive efforts.

Even more significant than June’s personal resistance are the recurring examples of collective resistance presented in the series. As the Handmaids engage in these collective acts, they simultaneously form an interpersonal female community. Several notable instances of female community include the Handmaids bringing June food after she is punished (S1E4), a packet of letters that June receives from various women in Gilead (S1E10), the Handmaids sharing their

names with each other in Loaves and Fishes (S2E7), the use of baked goods as system to signal participation in resistance efforts (S3E10), and the group effort between the Handmaids and Marthas to help 50+ children escape from Gilead (S3E13). June also gestures towards its existence in her voiceovers, referring to the Handmaids as “an army”³⁴ and “nightmares.”³⁵ Even in moments where this resistance is lacking, June acknowledges its power, such as at the beginning of Episode 4 Season 3. The scene depicts her walking in a line of other Handmaids to a church where the Handmaids, Marthas, Commanders, and Wives, also approaching in lines, gather for a celebration of babies born in their district. As June walks, the viewer sees several aerial shots of the lines converging towards the church. These shots reveal the scale of the scene, providing necessary context for June’s question in her voiceover: “Who among them can be persuaded, turned, ignited, to burn this shit place to the ground?” While her query applies to more than just Handmaids, here, June acknowledges the power of collective action. Furthermore, she also positions herself as the one to “persuade, turn, [and] ignite” those around her, thereby asserting her own opposition to the regime. This moment, among others, shows that female community and collective resistance do indeed exist within Gilead.

Even as the series notes the existence of this community, it also necessitates critique—critique which carefully interrogates the external and internal limitations placed on this interpersonal sisterhood. Indeed, Gileadean rape culture provides the most pervasive and explicit external limitations to female community and collective resistance. The television series thoroughly notes these limitations even as it continues to position this community as a foundational and necessary element of the Handmaid’s resistance. In the very first episode of Season 1, June walks with her shopping partner, Emily. During their walk, they stop in front of a store’s display window and Emily

³⁴ “They should have never given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army” (S1E10).

³⁵ “And here’s what we do. We watch them, the men. We study them. We feed them. We please them.... We know their worst nightmares. And with a bit of practice, that’s what we’ll become. Nightmares” (S3E4).

notes that it used to be an ice cream place. After a short, unexpected exchange, June tells Emily, “I always thought you were such a true believer.” Emily responds, “So were you. So freaking pious. They do that really well, make us distrust each other.” As they speak to each other, the camera captures the scene from June’s point of view, revealing how she uses their reflections in the display window to make eye contact with Emily. This small detail reminds viewers of the extensive physical limitations used to inhibit female community, even ones which go so far as to keep the women from making direct eye contact. Furthermore, by staging this conversation near a former ice-cream shop, the series illustrates how Gilead eradicated physical locations that encouraged the growth of community. This depiction of Gileadean culture as a disruptive external force against female community serves a twofold purpose. Firstly, it provides yet another example of the presence of Gileadean rape culture and its effectiveness in creating divisions and cultivating mistrust. This very mistrust between the Handmaids is a fundamental manifestation of rape culture as an environment which “encourages us to scrutinize victims’ stories” (Harding 4). Indeed, the pervasive effects of this culture extend to the victims themselves, as evidenced in June and Emily’s responses to each other. Secondly, this moment creates a space through which to explore how the Handmaids continue to resist—namely, how the development of this female community serves as a foundational base in their fight against Gilead’s oppressive treatment. In highlighting the formation and existence of this community, the series not only uplifts their resistance but also invites viewers to pay close attention to the limits of this shared experience.

RACIAL OPPRESSION WITHIN FEMALE COMMUNITY

Even as the television series carefully depicts an increased level of individual and collective resistance within this interpersonal female community, it fails to address the layers of privilege evident within it. In other words, the series falls short in addressing the limits of this community—namely how it regularly excludes women of color. Instead, the series continues to focus on the

resilience and effective opposition advanced by its two main white women, June and Serena Joy. Through its continued focus on their access to privilege and success in pushing back against Gilead, the series prioritizes the white woman's experience within this female community. This privileging of whiteness takes two main forms. Firstly, the series establishes sympathy for both June and Serena Joy. While not inherently negative, the series thus creates a pattern of developing the complexity of both characters—development which creates a more sympathetic and affective portrayal of both. It does not afford this treatment and complexity to its women of color. Consequently, it advances a limited depiction of female community and resistance predicated on the white woman's treatment within Gilead. Secondly, the series continues to privilege their whiteness by positioning women of color as props for the white woman's journey of resistance. This further emphasizes the white women's experiences over those of the women of color, situating white women as the representative entities within this female community. Altogether, this privileging of June and Serena Joy advances a white-washed notion of female resistance and feminism.

Unlike Atwood's original novel—which sidesteps conversations of race by creating a white-washed Gilead—the television series attempts to fill in the gaps of Atwood's novel through its diverse cast. However, it does this in a colorblind way that strips away the meaning of these adaptative choices. Atwood's original novel contains no mention of persons of color other than a reference to “the Children of Ham” (83) who have been “resettled” to “National Homeland One...in North Dakota (83-84).³⁶ However, the television series casts persons of color in numerous

³⁶ Danita Dodson addresses the novel's handling of race, noting, “the Children of Ham (African-Americans) and the Sons of Jacob (Jewish-Americans) are regarded as hindrances to the creation of a superior race and a superior religion, so they are sequestered and sent to neo-containment camps” (4). Paul Moffett also writes on this, arguing that “Atwood's novel is conscious of the racial implication of control of reproduction.... It was the desire to create and maintain a white state that was part of the impetus behind the creation of the book's Gilead, and the whiteness of the book's world is part of what makes it dystopian” (158). Both of these scholars aptly point out how the erasure of race in Atwood's novel illustrates Gilead's racist ideology—the belief that any non-white individuals would harm the success of the regime and therefore ought to be eliminated. As a result of this erasure, the presence of race within the novel holds a less noticeable place than the series.

roles, namely aforementioned O. T. Fagbenle as Luke Bankole, June's husband; Samira Wiley as Moira Strand, June's best friend; and Jordana Blake as Hannah Bankole, June and Luke's daughter. In an article for *Vulture*, Angelica Jade Bastién notes how the series also features “black, Asian, and Latina Handmaids” (3) and “Commanders of color” (5)—characters which are often portrayed “on the margins of the show” (5). Thus, within the series, race occupies a much more visible role than Atwood's original novel. However, this role is still fraught, as evidenced by Bastién's thoughtful observation that characters of color remain largely “on the margins.” In leaving these characters in subsidiary positions, the series also sidelines meaningful conversations about race. Aisha Phoenix addresses the implications of this decision:

While the book and the series take contrasting approaches to the depiction of people of color, with Atwood rendering them invisible and Miller including them as central characters, neither engages with the mundane, everyday racism to which people of color are subjected. They, therefore, miss the valuable opportunity to challenge the very discourses that are being propagated in the rise of populism and white supremacy, that *The Handmaid's Tale* cautions us about. (207-208)

As Phoenix aptly observes, this failure to “engage with the mundane, everyday racism” in both the novel and the series leads to very troubling narrative and representational decisions that reassert the importance of whiteness and ignore the presence of racial oppression. This approach is particularly problematic in the television series. Due to its medium as a televisual adaptation, the series has ample opportunities to correct these shortcomings in Atwood's novel just as it does with the depiction of rape culture—opportunities which it neglects in its reliance on colorblind casting.

As a new cultural product, there are limited scholarly responses to the series as a whole; however, within these responses, scholars have indeed critiqued the series for its colorblind casting and treatment of race. Indeed, broader scholarly critiques of colorblind casting lend valuable insight

to reading the problems with the series' reliance on this approach. Colorblind casting largely ignores race, ethnicity and other facets of identity under the pretense that they should not influence an actor's ability to play a role. Ayanna Thompson notes the pitfalls of this approach, positing, "various models of nontraditional casting [i.e. colorblind casting] can actually replicate racist stereotypes *because* we have not addressed the unstable semiotics of race (when we see race; how we see race; how we make sense of what race means within a specific production)" (qtd. in Pittman 182). In other words, colorblind casting leads to an erasure of the complexities inherent in our very response to race and the significance of how it is represented within cultural products like *The Handmaid's Tale*. Thus, in taking a colorblind approach, the series strips the meaning away from its diverse casting decisions. Rather than address how the skin color of its actors necessitates larger conversations about and reflection on social inequality and racial oppression, the series ignores this broader discourse. Bastián cogently critiques the series for this approach, stating, "While it's easy to cast people of color in a variety of roles, it's far harder to meaningfully evoke the ways race affects our lives—*The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic example of the problem with settling for diversity that exists out of a desire to be 'color blind'" (7).³⁷ Instead of evoking meaningful discussions and resisting problematic tropes, this approach causes the series to be complicit in perpetuating the very hierarchies of oppression it attempts to resist in its diverse casting.³⁸ Karen Crawley furthers this argument, noting how the series fails to "thematically or narratively" address race—focusing instead on "gender, sexuality and resistance at the expense of race, politics and history" (335-336). In light of these critiques, my project also pushes back against the series' unsuccessful or altogether absent

³⁷ Bastián also observes, "that the series fails to properly consider how race intersects with its discussion of theocratic rule and rank misogyny isn't surprising, considering there are no women of color on its writing staff" (7).

³⁸ While most scholars critique the series for its approach to casting, Dennis Tredy takes a different stance, arguing that "the many African American characters on screen" draw attention to "today's world of African American and Black Lives Matter protests, and the #MeToo movement, themes of racism and interracial marriage..." (214). I agree with Tredy to an extent. In casting these specific actors, the series opens the possibility for a more meaningful discussion of race; however, as noted above, it fails to actually do this.

attempts to engage in these larger conversations about racial oppression. Even as I commend the series for its multifaceted, nuanced, and transparent depictions of rape culture, female resistance and community, it does not negate the need for a more intersectional approach³⁹ to race that does not continue to privilege whiteness and exclude persons of color.

As previously established, the series thoroughly depicts the existence and importance of female community as a means of resistance to Gileadean rape culture. However, in this portrayal, the series continually focuses more on the two main white women, June and Serena Joy. In doing so, it prioritizes their experience, highlighting their resistance and thereby positioning them as complex characters. While initially positive, the continued focus on June and Serena Joy occurs at the expense of women of color—women who do not experience the same careful characterization and attention devoted to June and Serena Joy. Instead, when women of color do appear, they hold subsidiary roles that only function to further June and Serena Joy's success. Thus, the series unintentionally advances a view of feminism and female resistance that largely excludes women of color. As a result, it fails to adopt an intersectional approach to female community, one which notes the difference in women's experiences rather than imagining white women as representative of their collective experience.⁴⁰ Audre Lorde addresses this lack of intersectionality in feminism, stating, "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus on their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116). In attempting to highlight this "homogenous *sisterhood*" within its female community, the series leans into this stereotype,

³⁹ I use Collier Meyerson's apt summary of the origin and meaning of this term: "Intersectionality, a core third-wave-feminist concept, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, recognizes that race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class shape one another. Intersectionality is hardly anathema to unity, and instead a building block toward achieving it" (117).

⁴⁰ Aven McMaster articulates the connection between this homogenizing approach and colorblind casting, stating, "This flattening of women's experience is made particularly notable by the color-blind casting of the show, which leads to a diverse cast who are nonetheless presented as having a uniform experience" (25).

creating a sisterhood predicated on the experience of white women—one which overlooks how women of color are further removed from privilege because of their race. Crawley aptly summarizes the problems inherent in this approach: “In universalizing the white experience, *The Handmaid’s Tale* prioritizes a particular strand of feminist critique that assumes all women suffer equally under patriarchal systems” (351). This assumption wrongly ignores how race and other differences impact how women experience oppression, for as Michelle Chen reminds us, “Vulnerability to sexual violence also hinges on other social hierarchies” (196). Thus, in exploring female community and resistance primarily through June and Serena Joy, the series glosses over these “other social hierarchies.”⁴¹ A more intersectional approach necessitates an analysis of these dynamics, one that holds the series accountable for its consistent privileging of whiteness.

The series advances white feminism in several ways, the first being its nuanced and sympathetic development of Serena Joy’s character. Serena Joy, unlike June, does not operate as a protagonist within the series. Instead, she frequently commits horrific acts of violence and manipulation against June. These acts include physically abusing June after learning she is not pregnant (S1E3); blackmailing June by threatening to harm her daughter, Hannah (S1E10); and, most horrifically, suggesting and participating in violently raping June outside of the ritualized rape ceremony in an attempt to force June to go into labor (S2E10). Despite her oppressive, dehumanizing and heinous treatment towards June, however, the series consistently attempts to soften Serena Joy’s character with a backstory. This marks a distinct shift from Atwood’s novel, which does not humanize Serena Joy’s character. In developing the complexity of Serena Joy’s character, the series blurs the lines between her and June—between oppressor and oppressed. It

⁴¹ Heather Hendershot cogently articulates the series’ failure to meaningfully acknowledge how these hierarchies impact women within Gilead, “If *The Handmaid’s Tale* aptly addresses how the culture is grappling with sexual assault, harassment, and subjugation, it offers much less insight into how differences other than gender are at play in templates of inequality” (13).

even goes so far as to highlight their mutual acts of resistance, thereby situating Serena Joy as a member of this resistant female community. Serena Joy's backstory first appears in a flashback where viewers learn that Serena Joy had been a writer (S1E6). In the flashback, she explains a new book idea to Waterford—to examine “fertility as a national resource” and “reproduction as a moral imperative.” Waterford encourages her, even going so far as to suggest that she explain it to his colleagues, the very men who would become Commanders in Gilead. When Serena Joy attempts to present this idea, however, the men tell Waterford to present on her behalf since she is a woman. Thus, the very patriarchal ideology that Serena Joy espouses in her book becomes a limiting factor, removing her voice and agency. This appears again at the end of the episode where viewers see the Waterfords adjusting to their new home in Gilead. Serena Joy puts on her blue dress while Nick carries Serena Joy's book and others in a box out to the curb and lights them on fire. By juxtaposing these scenes of Serena Joy's loss of agency and livelihood alongside her chilling involvement in Gilead's conception, the television show softens her actions.⁴²

The series also softens Serena Joy's complicity by consistently highlighting her desire for a child. Thus, while viewers rarely lose sight of Serena Joy's participation in Gilead's oppression, this underlying motivation presents viewers with an opportunity to create an affective connection to her desire for a child. In Season 2 Episode 6, audiences witness another flashback to Serena Joy's past. During a presentation at a university where she encourages women to “embrace their biological destiny” and bear children, Serena Joy abruptly leaves as members of the crowd begin to violently protest. As she leaves the premises, someone shoots her in the abdomen. While not explicitly stated, the series seems to attribute Serena Joy's inability to bear children as a result of this injury. However, in noting how strongly she believed in bearing children as her “biological destiny,” the series

⁴² While it is indeed true that Serena Joy suffers the effects of the Gileadean rape culture even in her privileged position as a Commander's wife, this does not negate her willful complicity in creating the very system that oppresses her.

contextualizes the depth of her desire for children. In fact, throughout the three seasons, Serena Joy repeatedly exhibits her mothering desire as she attends the other Wives' birthing ceremonies, asks after their children's health, and takes an active and wishful interest in any children. Her love of children and desire for her own thus serve as the reasons for her most significant moments of individual resistance. These moments include Serena Joy defying her husband and the Gileadean regime by asking a female neonatologist to examine a sick baby (S2E8); leading a coalition of Wives in petitioning for an amendment to Gilead's rule that would allow their daughters to read the Bible (S2E13); and even permitting her infant daughter, Nichole, to be smuggled to Canada in an attempt to give her access to a life outside of the oppressive Gileadean regime (S2E13).⁴³ In each of these instances, Serena Joy operates from a desire to either have a child or to improve the quality of life for children within Gilead. By depicting these moments, the series adds depth to Serena Joy's character—depth which makes it easier for viewers to respond to her in a sympathetic manner.

In addition to softening Serena Joy's character by highlighting her loss of privilege within Gilead and her driving motivation to be a mother, the series also creates a connection between her and June—a connection developed through their acts of collective resistance. The ramifications of this treatment are two-fold. Firstly, it positions both white women as examples of collective resistance. Secondly, it illustrates their increased access to power and privilege within Gilead. Thus, in emphasizing their collective female resistance, the series excludes women of color from this interpersonal sisterhood and instead advances a white-washed, monolithic depiction of female resistance within Gilead. One notable example of their collective resistance occurs in Season 2 Episode 7. The episode picks up after a Handmaid suicide bomber destroyed a new Rachel and Leah center, injuring and hospitalizing several key Commanders, including Fred Waterford. In their

⁴³ While Serena Joy regrets this decision and take various actions to bring Nichole back, this moment illustrates her strong focus on the wellbeing of her daughter—a focus which grew out of her overwhelming desire for a child.

absence, Commander Cushing (Greg Bryk) takes control by tightening security through violent methods, measures which Serena Joy opposes by secretly drafting an arrest warrant in Waterford's name. After her success, she drafts additional security orders, even going so far as to ask June to help edit them.⁴⁴ June asserts her willingness to help by asking for a pen. The camera's almost methodical attention to their actions—June selecting a pen, Serena Joy settling into Waterford's office chair, the sound of the security orders rustling, and a close up of June's hand as she clicks open the pen—builds up the sense of deliberate, collective resistance and comradeship, albeit hesitant, between June and Serena Joy. This dynamic appears again in the next episode when June notes, “In another life we could maybe have been colleagues...in this one we're heretics” (S2E8). Here, June brings attention to their past roles as writer and editor, noting also how these roles make them both “heretics” in Gilead. Thus, she positions her and Serena Joy as resistant figures working together against Gilead. This connection surfaces again in Season 3 Episode 4 when June advocates for Serena Joy, advising Waterford to “maybe give her [Serena Joy] a real voice...behind the scenes, of course.” In a private moment with Serena Joy, June continues this argument, reminding Serena that she has influence, access, and power. “Wear the dress, pull the strings,” June says. After June's statement, Serena Joy quietly passes over a cigarette and lighter, two items expressly forbidden and only available in the black market. Together, they share a moment of solidarity as they smoke quietly. These scenes reveal the privilege that June and Serena Joy both have in accessing the power of the Commanders. Furthermore, they position June and Serena Joy as advocates for each other—something both characters do not advance towards women of color.

This privileging of whiteness becomes even more obvious when compared to the series' treatment of Moira. Paul Moffett writes extensively about Moira's role in the series, noting that “Moira is not the only woman of color in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but she is by far the woman of color

⁴⁴ See Figure 4 in Appendix 1 (pg. 58).

to whom the narrative of the show gives the most attention, and as such, she is saddled with the interpretive weight of having to be representative of women of color in general” (162).⁴⁵ Despite receiving this attention, Moira only appears in 18 out of the 36 total episodes of the series. Even within these depictions, Moira’s story and affective experiences are treated differently than June and Serena Joy’s. Bastián calls attention to this treatment: “In particularly complex emotional moments for June, Janine, and even Serena Joy, they are framed in extreme close-up...Moira gets no shots like this. There is an emotional removal in regards to how the camera interacts with her compared to the aforementioned white women” (7). This filming tactic affirms the series’ privileging of whiteness by giving viewers no access to Moira’s interiority and affective response to the regime. Thus, the only responses viewers see are from white women. Furthermore, even in these less affective depictions of Moira’s character, the series still fails to address her race in any meaningful ways. This lack becomes more obvious when compared to the series’ depiction of Moira’s experience as a lesbian. Indeed, the series includes a sexual encounter between Moira and another woman (S2E3), presents flashbacks of how Moira met her partner, Odette⁴⁶ (S2E7), and creates a friendship between Moira and the other main lesbian character in the series, Emily.⁴⁷ In doing so, the series draws attention to Moira’s sexual orientation, yet ignores how race operates as yet another important facet of her identity. Moffett observes this, stating, “her [Moira’s] identity as a woman of color is not relevant to either her character or to the development of the plot” (161). The series does positively depict how Moira

⁴⁵ Indeed, situating Moira as the representative person of color for the broader community is a classic technique of white privilege. Peggy McIntosh defines this privilege as “invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance” (qtd. in Pittman 187). L. Monique Pittman further notes, “white privilege dangerously operates through omission and inattention” (187). Thus, by not only ignoring Moira’s race, but also casting her as the main representative for persons of color, the series “omits” the broader experience of persons of color as a whole.

⁴⁶ Played by Rebecca Rittenhouse.

⁴⁷ Even though the series acknowledges Moira’s sexual orientation as a contributing factor to her identity and her existence within Gilead, it still gives her less attention than it does to Emily, a white, lesbian Handmaid. Indeed, Emily appears in 16 out of the total 36 episodes, only two episodes less than Moira. Furthermore, the series depicts how Gilead punishes Emily with a forced clitoridectomy after she pursues a lesbian relationship with a Martha (S1E3). While horrific, this reveals how the series focuses more on depicting how Emily’s sexual orientation affects her experience within Gilead than Moira’s.

successfully escapes Gilead and settles in Canada. However, while positive, this depiction leads to the literal removal of Moira from the main narrative arc within Gilead. In other words, Moira successfully resists, but her resistance occurs primarily outside the Gileadean regime. As such, the series removes her as a potential example of a woman of color operating within the resistant female community inside Gilead. Altogether, in depicting Moira in limited, less vulnerable, and narratively distant ways, the series fails to craft a thoughtful treatment of women of color. Instead, these actions only further the series' privileging of whiteness.

The women of color who do remain in Gilead serve only as props for this whitewashed resistance movement, a movement with June at its head. In the most heinous form, these women of color experience abuse and oppression within this female community. The worst example of this occurs in Season 3 when June orchestrates a series of traumatic events against her new walking partner, Natalie⁴⁸ (played by African-American actor, Ashleigh LaThrop), a seemingly submissive, regime supportive, newly pregnant Handmaid. Throughout the season, June repeatedly clashes with Natalie, going so far as to wish harm on her and even attempting to choke her. Furthermore, June consistently misuses her camaraderie and persuasive powers with the other Handmaids to deliberately ostracize and gaslight⁴⁹ Natalie. She does so by convincing the other Handmaids to physically and emotionally abuse, publicly shame, and chastise Natalie. June even admits, "I hurt her, and I enjoyed it...it's an acquired taste seeing others in pain" (S3E8). As a result of this persistent trauma, Natalie experiences a psychotic break in *Loaves and Fishes*, grabbing merchandise and injuring a Handmaid and guard, followed by stealing a guard's gun and brandishing it towards Aunt

⁴⁸ Natalie is known more commonly as Ofmatthew within the series; however, I will refer to her as Natalie in the same way that I refer to Offred as June and Ofglen as Emily. In calling them by their names I attempt to assert their humanity and not perpetuate the use of dehumanizing patronymics.

⁴⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines this as "To manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity" ("Gaslight, v.").

Lydia (Ann Dowd). Throughout this process, June looks on with a smile, even going so far as to nod when Natalie turns the gun towards Aunt Lydia (S3E8). Through these subtle actions, June reinforces her claim that she “enjoys” hurting Natalie and positions herself as a malevolent authoritative figure in the climax of Natalie’s mental and emotional instability.

While June’s treatment of Natalie is undeniably problematic, more concerning, however, is her response following Natalie’s breakdown. After the incident, Natalie is kept alive in the hospital to serve as a literal incubator for her unborn child. As a punishment for her treatment of Natalie, the Aunts force June to kneel on the hospital floor in Natalie’s room and pray. Even here, June continues to abuse Natalie, going so far as to make several attempts to kill her. Finally, June states, “I got lost, I think. Not that that’s a good excuse. I don’t really have another reason. They just take everything from you, you know” (S3E9). In blaming her actions as “getting lost,” the series fails to hold June accountable for her willful complicity and wrongful treatment towards Natalie. The timing of this statement is particularly concerning as June delivers this explanation at Natalie’s bedside shortly after doctors successfully deliver her son. Rather than express true remorse, June turns Natalie’s impending death into a moment about her son, saying that he, like other children in Gilead, do not “deserve to grow up in this place...I’m gonna get them out, because Gilead should know how this feels. It’s their turn to hurt” (S3E10). At the end of June’s declaration, Natalie’s heart monitor slows and stops. Thus, this moment illustrates how June uses Natalie’s death as the inspiration for her next act of resistance. In choosing to focus on Natalie’s son, rather than Natalie herself, June aligns herself with Gilead’s treatment of Natalie as nothing more than a body capable of reproduction. Bastián notes the problems with this dynamic, positing, “The bodies and histories of black and brown women prove to be useful templates for shows like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but our actual voices aren’t” (8). Quite literally, Natalie’s body becomes nothing more than a prop for June to abuse—a prop which then provides fuel for June’s continuing protagonist arc. Thus, in refusing

to hold June accountable for these actions, and for creating an arc in which a woman of color is brutally mistreated and sacrificed for the sake of June's resistance, the television series continues to privilege white female resistance and community.

CONCLUSION

Despite being written thirty-five years ago, Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, continues to leave its mark on our current culture. It remains a foundational text in women's studies courses, a seemingly permanent fixture in reading lists and on the shelves of Barnes and Nobles. Furthermore, the ideas espoused within the book have taken on a life of their own. Women protest in courtrooms wearing Handmaid costumes and others tattoo their skin and pepper their tweets with #nolitetebastardescarborundorum. The cultural footprint of this text expanded further with the arrival of the Hulu award-winning televisual adaptation. This series prompted a surge of renewed interest in the world Atwood created, capturing countless viewers in its absorbing and aesthetic depiction of Gilead. With the release of her sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), Atwood added even more fuel to culture's fascination in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This interest in Atwood's texts and the television series illustrates the critical role that art can play in crafting public consciousness and response to current events such as the #MeToo movement, Trump's presidency, and changing legislation on abortion. Indeed, the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, takes on an eerie significance in light of its dependence on historical precedence—precedence which some believe to be altogether too similar to our current political reality. While some may protest these connections between Gilead and our present society, the cultural attention on Atwood's novel and the television series is abundantly clear.

As such, it is important to critically evaluate these works, particularly in regards to what they espouse about gender and racial oppression. Doing so offers scholars, readers, and viewers an opportunity to rethink and redefine complicity, as the series does for the novel. Furthermore, it also offers us a glimpse into how much we sadly resist engaging with issues of race when it comes to

gender oppression. Unfortunately, this approach appears even in Atwood's sequel and 2019 Booker Prize winner, *The Testaments*. The sequel depicts Gilead fifteen years after the time of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the sequel, Atwood tells the stories of three women: Aunt Lydia; Agnes Jemima, Offred's daughter with Luke; and Daisy, Offred's daughter born within Gilead and later smuggled to Canada (also known as Baby Nichole). The novel ultimately reveals how Aunt Lydia works to help both girls escape as part of her larger plan to overthrow Gilead. In highlighting this, Atwood recasts Aunt Lydia as a protagonist—one who has been plotting for years, doing what it takes to survive so that she can damage Gilead. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Sophie Gilbert notes, "Atwood continues to blur stark villain-victim distinctions. She gives readers a witness who has claimed not just agency for herself, but an agenda. During the years that have elapsed since the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Lydia has been neither voiceless nor unsung" (8). Indeed, in giving Aunt Lydia this notable and visible "agency" and "agenda," Atwood privileges Aunt Lydia's experience as yet another white woman in Gilead. Thus, she returns to white feminism and the very sympathy for the oppressor evident in the television series' treatment of Serena Joy. Sadly, the troubling dynamics within *The Testaments* may have an even broader cultural impact as Hulu plans to develop the sequel into another television series (Bradley 2). This illustrates the ever-increasing importance of examining how these works perpetuate systems of racial oppression even as they seek to confront misogyny and rape culture.

For this reason, I reiterate my two-fold contribution. Firstly, we must analyze the presence of rape culture in both the novel and the series in order to have ethical conversations about complicity and resistance. This allows us to avoid the very victim blaming that perpetuates the existence of rape culture. Secondly, we must hold the series accountable for its problematic advancement of white feminism—an approach which largely excludes women of color and therefore fails to note the presence of racial oppression. Addressing the works in these ways draws attention

to the systems of oppression which created these problems in the first place. As Charisse Levchak beautifully articulates, “More of us must use our voices, power, and privilege to serve as allies, to actively stand in solidarity with those under attack, and to name, challenge, and work to eradicate *all* systems of oppression (not just the ones that impact us, or those we care about)” (152). Indeed, turning our focus to these works presents us with an opportunity to “use our voices, power, and privilege” to direct attention to ourselves and how our society frequently participates in victim blaming and the erasure of persons of color. Read together, the strengths and weaknesses of the novel and series actually highlight the importance of paying attention. In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred notes the oppression that existed before Gilead, explaining how she and others “lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (56). Similarly, the powerful warnings about misogyny and the problematic messaging regarding race in the novel, and especially the series, stress the importance of noting the injustice already present in the past. However, as Offred warns, we must do more than merely acknowledge their presence. Instead, we must pay careful attention to these injustices, noting our complicity within these systems of oppression both in our own lives and the art we consume. In doing so we investigate our own privilege and find methods to resist, both micro and macro, individually and collectively. Only then can we guarantee that we do not perpetuate this cycle of willful ignorance.

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Appendix 1: Screenshots from Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* Television Series

Figure 1: Screenshot from Season 1 Episode 6 (included on pg. 29)

Figure 2: Screenshot of the Lincoln Memorial in Season 3 Episode 5



Figure 3: Screenshot of the Washington Monument in Season 3 Episode 5



Figure 4: Screenshot of Serena Joy handing June the warrants to edit in Season 2 Episode 8

