Moira, take me with you!
Utopian Hope and Queer Horizons in Three Versions of The Handmaid’s Tale

Hedvig Marx

Supervisor: Marietta Radomska, Gender Studies, LiU

Master’s Programme
Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change

Master’s thesis 30 ECTS credits

ISNR: LIU-TEMA G / GSIC2-A-18/005-SE
Abstract

Using postmodern, feminist and queer notions of utopia/dystopia and narrative theory, this thesis contains an analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (novel 1985; film 1990; TV series S01 2017) based on theoretical and methodological understandings of utopia/dystopia and narrative as deeply connected to notions of *temporality* and *relationality*, and of *violence* and *resistance* as the modes of expression of utopia and dystopia in the source texts. The analysis is carried out in an explorative manner (Czarniawska 2004) and utilises the notion of “disidentification” (Butler 1993; Muñoz 1999) and the concepts of “diffraction” (Haraway 1992, 1997; Barad 2007, 2010), and “entanglement” (Barad 2007). The conclusion becomes that utopia and dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are, to a great extent, imagined within the same system of understanding, but that utopian hope can be found in the relationality and temporality of resistance, and that the radically different utopian place is the queer horizon.

Keywords

The Handmaid’s Tale; Margaret Atwood; Donna Haraway; Karen Barad; José Esteban Muñoz; utopia; dystopia; entanglement; diffraction; disidentification; gender studies; queer theory; intersectionality; narratology
Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to a number of people for their part in helping me complete this thesis: First and foremost, to my supervisor Marietta Radomska – thank you for not letting me take the easy route and for pushing me to do better (if this amounts to anything it is certainly thanks to you); To my patient queer companion and husbian Lincoln, for endless support; To my sister Hanna for valuable input and parallel thesis writing process venting; To Lucy for expert help, and my other fellow students in the MSSc program co-tutor (support) group; To grannie Mildred for distracting chats (about god) by the mailbox; To Los Angeles for the excellent public library, and for the palm trees and sunsets that helped clear my mind.
Content

Chapter 1 - Introduction
   Introduction – 4
   Primary sources – 5
   Previous research – 6
   Research questions – 10
      Concepts – 11
      Limitations – 13
      Situating myself – 14

Chapter 2 - Theory
   Utopia in context – 15
   Postmodern, feminist, and queer utopias – 19
      Concept relationships – 25
   Art, entertainment, and utopia – 26
   Butler and Muñoz: Disidentification – 27

Chapter 3 - Methodology
   Narrative analysis – 28
   Feminist and queer interventions – 32
      The explorative approach – 35
   Haraway: Situated knowledges – 36
      Barad: Entanglement – 37
   Haraway and Barad: Diffraction – 38

Chapter 4 - Analyses
   Introduction – 39
   Temporality – 42
   Relationality – 53
      Violence – 58
      Resistance – 65

Chapter 5 - Conclusion
   Conclusion – 69

References
   References – 73

Appendix
   Part I: A Brief Outline of The Handmaid’s Tales – 85
   Part II: List of Characters – 88
Chapter 1

Heart of Glass – Introduction

June and Moira are at a protest. It is loud and intense but proves quite small; not very many protesters show up at this point, but the ones who do are met by heavily armed Gilead military or police in tactical gear (2017, S01E03). This type of scene is familiar to many people, including me. I have been to numerous protests, screaming out my frustration, finding some sort of hope in the presence of other protesters. I have stood across from police officers in tactical gear with their backs to the Nazis and their cold eyes on us, looking hungry for confrontation. In the scene with June and Moira, the police unexpectedly open fire with the intent to kill, though they are under no apparent threat. Moira and June run away in fear, through a hail of bullets. They take cover in a coffee shop. Slow motion. A lingering protester gets shot while running away; the body keeps propelling forward with awkward flailing steps until it falls. Glass shatters. The scene is from the TV series version of The Handmaid’s Tale, which is based on the 1985 novel of the same name; a speculative fiction account of a coup d’état in the U.S. making way for the totalitarian, Christian fundamentalist, white supremacist, patriarchal Republic of Gilead where the narrator is kept in reproductive servitude.¹

The Handmaid’s Tale makes me feel things; it reminds me of how precarious my human rights and privileges are, and, somewhat despite itself, how abundant they still somehow are at the same time (compared to the nothings of others). I know it is fiction, but I also know that it isn’t. In a way, its own history is part of what gives its dystopian threat such momentum in the now. The almost impossible future of 1985 is the seemingly imminent future of 2017, and both of them are already part of the past. It is not only doable but done (again and again). Where is my mind supposed to wander in a time when people proudly declare themselves Nazis, queerphobes, misogynists, white supremacists, and nationalists (let alone neoliberal capitalists)? I need to find the cracks in this worldview, I need to see beyond what it imagines (a world without the people I love). I need to know how to stop it and where to start.

My aim with this thesis is to explore the utopia within the dystopia (resistance, possibility, gaps in the dominant narrative), as well as the violent, oppressive “utopia” that is the foundation of the dystopic worlds in three versions of The Handmaid’s Tale (1985, 1990, 2017) from an intersectional queer feminist perspective.² Further, I will attempt to chart the positions from

¹ For the reader who is not familiar with one or more versions of the primary source texts, parts I and II of the Appendix (brief summary page 85 and list of characters page 88) will provide a basic understanding of the story and some notable differences between the versions.

² For my understanding of intersectional and queer, please see the concepts section on page 11.
which these utopian/dystopian worlds are imagined, and their limitations, investigating the inclusions and exclusions in the intermingling ideas of dream/utopia and nightmare/dystopia. Lastly, looking to the political potential in utopia/dystopia in general and these three texts in particular, I intend to examine whether there is room for queer hope and horizons in them.

This introduction will be followed by a section on my primary sources, a look at the previous research into them, and subsequently the research questions for this thesis. I will give an account of the concepts I use in my writing, briefly touch on the limitations of this project, and conclude the chapter by situating myself in relation to my research. In the second chapter, I will describe the theory I intend to use for my research, providing a cursory historical overview of utopia and utopian theory, following up by focusing on postmodern, feminist and queer notions of utopia/dystopia. I will continue by discussing utopia and dystopia as concepts and the ways in which they connect and interact, after which I will comment on notions of utopian/dystopian fiction and political potential. At the end of chapter two, I will examine the concept of “disidentification” (Butler 1993; Muñoz 1999) and explain how I intend to use it. Chapter three will be focused on methodology, opening with an introduction to narrative theory, followed by an examination of queer and feminist interventions. After this, I will account for my use of an explorative approach (Czarniawska 2004 after Hernadi 1987), followed by a brief summary of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) which will be used as a foundation for that approach. Next, I will attempt to explain the concept of “entanglement” (Barad 2007) which is something that guides the way I view and analyse my primary source texts. Lastly, I will discuss the notion of “diffraction” (Haraway 1992, 1997; Barad 2007, 2010) and how intend to use this method of reading events/texts/phenomena through other events/texts/phenomena. Chapter four then proceeds with my analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* based on my theoretical and methodological understandings of utopia/dystopia and narrative as deeply connected to notions of *temporality* and *relationality*, as well as my understanding of the modes of expression of dystopia (as *violence*) and utopia (as *resistance*) in the source texts. In chapter five, I offer my conclusion that utopia and dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are, to a great extent, imagined within the same system of understanding, but that utopian hope can be found in the relationality and temporality of resistance, and that the radically different utopian place is the queer horizon.

**The Handmaids’ Tales – Primary sources**

As mentioned, I will be using three versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as my primary source texts for this thesis: The novel, published in 1985, written by Margaret Atwood; the film
adaption of the novel, released in 1990, directed by Volker Schlöndorff with a screenplay by Harold Pinter; the first season of the TV series adaption of the novel (and film) from 2017, written by Bruce Miller in collaboration with Margaret Atwood, Nina Fiore, John Herrera and others, and directed by Mike Barker, Reed Morano, Kate Dennis, Floria Sigismond and Kari Skogland. These versions span over more than thirty years in time of release, and were thus created and received in vastly different contexts. There are many interesting differences and similarities between the versions, and even instances of events taking place only in the film and TV series, but not in the original novel. Part of what I wish to analyse are these entanglements, transformations, and re-examinations. I believe that it will be interesting to examine the external contextual changes between the source texts, and the representations of dystopia (violence; oppression; control) and utopia (resistance; hope; potential) over time.

Scrabble, Scripture, and Sisters Dipped in Blood – Previous research
There is a wealth of research on Margaret Atwood’s novel. As for the film adaption and the TV series, there is considerably less material, especially if one is looking for peer-reviewed scholarly texts. Beyond general commentary on the adaption of the novel, I have been able to find one article that deals more in-depth with both the novel and the film but at the time of writing, none that concern the TV series. However, there are some reviews and critical pieces in magazines, and several shorter pieces in publications such as Variety, The Economist, and Vogue dealing with things like critical reception and subject relevance. These types of mainstream media critical writings also exist in connection with the film, mainly from around its release in 1990. While I will rely more heavily on the scholarly writing relevant to my areas of examination, on account of this mixed availability I will also bring in other sources when called for. Of the research that is focused on the novel, there is great width in thematic content. From ecocritical readings, to analyses of food habits, to biblical comparisons and religious interpretations. A great deal of writing also engages in comparative studies, both of Atwood’s and other writers’ works, and, quite extensively of Atwood’s oeuvre more generally. However, in order to make this a feasible project, I shall have to limit my closer contact with previous research to those areas and subjects that relate to the focus of my own thesis.

---

1 I will not be using the opera adaption, stage and radio plays, or ballet (Atwood 1985, p. xv; Jadwin 2010, p. 21) as primary source texts. Partly because I cannot access and analyse some of them in their entirety, and partly on account of scope and feasibility.
2 E.g. the killing in the film and how Kate/June help Moira escape in both film and TV series.
3 Cooper (1995) focuses specifically on seeing and watching, and its doubling in the film.
4 E.g. Dockterman 2017; Schwartz 2017; Mead 2017.
The Handmaid’s Tale is generally considered to be a dystopian novel, as it deals with a near future in an oppressive regime from the point of view of one of the oppressed. Literary scholar Amin Malak (1987), for example, confirms that it contains the “salient dystopian features” (p. 4), concluding that “obvious feminist focus” distinguishes Atwood’s novel (p. 6). Science-fiction scholar Peter Fitting (1990) uses the novel as one of his examples when examining a “disappoint[ing] and wor[ying]” turn from utopian to dystopian writing in feminist literature, noting that they are two different strategies; utopia uses allure, while dystopia issues warnings (pp. 154-55). Literary scholar Dunja M. Mohr (2005) brings feminist and postmodern thinking into her reading and takes a somewhat different look at utopia/dystopia in The Handmaid’s Tale, calling the novel a feminist transgressive utopian dystopia and an unfixed utopia (p. 270): Mohr finds narration to be a “utopian subtext” (p. 230) and a means for “transgression of binarism” in it. She describes language as both a utopian and a dystopian tool in the novel and claims that the narrator creates subversion through multiplicity – e.g. several versions of events, multiple meanings of words (pp. 232-33). Mohr also comments on the many genre styles in the novel (e.g. romance, dystopia, gothic), noting that Atwood “subvert[s] generic boundaries” which is another transgressive feature (p. 241). This connects with the ideas of utopia I will focus on in Chapter 2.

In my readings of the source texts, I find that the mode of expression of utopia within the oppressive dystopia of Gilead is different acts of resistance – ranging from rebellious thought to acts of violence – and several researchers touch on this, as well as different expressions of power, in their writing on the novel. Literary scholar Hilde Staels (1995) writes about “resistance through narrating” (p. 227) describing the subversive power in Offred’s11 “personal, aesthetic discourse”, used to counter Gileadean language, which she finds “functionalize[d] to the extreme” and a manifestation of the ubiquitous capitalist construct of the regime (pp. 229-30). Literary scholar Glenn Deer (1994), on the other hand, presents Offred as an “authoritative and authoritarian” narrator (p. 95) and counters any sort of idea of the protagonist’s innocence, noting, instead, a “penchant for the horrific” (p. 103) and an “aesthetic enjoyment of […] victimization”, criticising a position that turns away from “collective problems” (p. 96) to remain preoccupied with the personal. English professor Marta Caminero-Santangelo (1994) calls The Handmaid’s Tale a “resistant postmodern novel”, discussing its simultaneous

11 The only explicit name for the main protagonist in the novel is Offred, which is not the characters pre-Gileadean name, but the one she gets at the current posting. Kate is used as her pre-Gileadean name in the film, and June is used in the TV series.
complicity with mass culture and recognition of mass culture as the only possible location for resistance (p. 88). Literary scholar Marta Dvorák (1998) similarly comments on Atwood’s satirising of mass culture while working within it (p. 143). Part of this focus on mass culture is connected to the critique of the romance genre elements of the novel, something English professor Sandra Tomec (1993) engages with, asking “[w]hat are we to make of Atwood’s seeming refusal of a politics of emancipation? How do we interpret her apparently uncritical endorsement of the self-protective passivity of her heroine?” (p. 81). However, despite her criticism of the romance elements, and Offred’s passivity, she does read the low-brow status of romance as subversive (which ties in with Mohr, above), stating, for example, its function of “slipping through” official historical discourse (p. 89). Literary scholar Madonne Miner (1991) also addresses the romance content of the novel, directly countering claims made by others (e.g. Ehrenreich 1986; Malak 1987; Howells 2005) that love is a “subversive force” in the story, commenting that the way love is portrayed tends to “follow decidedly conservative narrative forms” (pp. 22-23) and that Offred resigns from resistance because of romance (p. 35). The issue of resistance and Offred’s passive complicity has also been brought up by several others (e.g. Stillman & Johnson 1994; Deer 1994; Stein 1996; Mohr 2005). As shown above, resistance, power, and complicity are themes that have been addressed in the previous research both in terms of narrative form (voice, vocabulary, narrative style) and narrative content (story/plot, characters, events) in the novel, and I will return to these issues in my analysis, connecting to them in the film and the TV series as well.

The novel has been called feminist since it was first published, and has also been challenged on its feminism for just as long. For example, literary scholar Lucy M. Freibert (1986) finds it to be a feminist critique of political possibilities, while simultaneously pointing out women’s complicity in all facets of Gilead (p. 284, p. 280). To Malak (1987), it is something of a given that the novel should be considered feminist, as it is set in an overtly misogynist society which is portrayed as a nightmare (p. 6). He, too, comments on women’s complicity in Gilead, noting (seemingly to his surprise) that Atwood “refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety” and that the characters’ sympathetic and demonic traits cannot be guessed by their gender alone (pp. 6-7). This hint of bewilderment at women’s complicity in upholding totalitarian patriarchal structures is a little dated, not to say naïve, but that, in and of itself, is a noteworthy point – it shows an understanding of feminism to be a women’s issue rather than an issue of power structures that affect all people in a society. Another early critique of the novel and its feminism is that it, in its attempt to criticise repressive patriarchy, sets up a Gilead which is easy to read
as a radical feminist society. For example, author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich (1986) comments that Gilead is only a “fortress of patriarchy” on the surface, claiming that “[i]t is also, in a thoroughly sinister and distorted way, the utopia of cultural feminism”\(^\text{12}\) and a warning “about a repressive tendency in feminism itself” (p. 79). This is supposedly to do with the role of women in the rise and implementation of Gilead, as well as the key parts they play in maintaining it. Another aspect is the “women’s culture” (Atwood 1985, 127; Mohr 2005, 249) that the Aunts promote, and that is manifested through separatism, rituals and societal roles (Ehrenreich 1986; Bouson 1993). Literary scholar J. Brooks Bouson makes an interesting point when she connects pre-Gileadean society and Gileadean society specifically as two sides of the same misogynistic patriarchal system, where the pre-Gileadean women are “subject to the killing male rage” (1993, p. 140) in its chaotic unsanctioned forms – as murder, rape, and assault – and the women in Gilead are subjected to the organised, sanctioned forms of that rage – ritual rape, sexual servitude, torture, corporeal punishment, the constant threat of death. Feminism is one of the areas where there has been media commentary both on the film (e.g. Clark 1990; Calleri 1990; Kempley 1990) and the TV series (e.g. Schwartz 2017; Williams 2017) as well. In other words, there are several points of view, and it is also clear that the feminist content has changed through and with the adaption, just as the political context and interpretations have changed over time.

In the commentary on feminist themes and feminist types of utopia/dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I find one significant area of omissions in the previous research which warrants closer scrutiny: whiteness, and universalist tendencies. It is not altogether left out, but it is disproportionately ignored, especially in the earlier writings. However, feminist scholar Catherine R. Stimpson (1986) notes that the “Atwood Woman”, the central character in the author’s works, is “young, educated, white, middle class, invariably heterosexual” illustrating the range, or lack thereof, in experiences portrayed (p. 80). In addition to this, literary scholar Jamie Dopp (1994) examines Offred’s “limited perspective” and the method of “enfore[ing]” it on the reader by way of a “non-contradictory collective voice”, a constant *we* as speaking for the other handmaids and for the reader, “taking on the guise of an Everywoman” (p. 92). These two points in and of themselves – Atwood Woman and Everywoman, i.e. a foundation of white universalist feminism – would perhaps not be quite as problematic in another story, but, coupled with the imagery of oppression that forms Gilead, they do become problematic in this one.

\(^{12}\) Cultural feminism focuses on “gender differences between women and men” and “the liberation of women through individual change”. Further, it promotes *women’s culture* and “utilizes essentialist understandings of male and female differences as the foundation of women’s subordination in society” (Wolff 2007).
Atwood’s Gilead is overtly racist, with a white supremacist agenda (e.g. Atwood 1985, p. 83; p. 304), however, while this ideology is implicitly condemned (as part of the nightmare dystopian society) there is no indication in the story of any awareness regarding the history of similar oppression towards people of colour, nor any acknowledgement of experiences or needs other than white ones, in the face of the Gileadean regime. Commenting on this, sociologist Ben Merriman (2009) brings attention to the “white-washing [of] oppression” that he finds in the novel, noting that Atwood hides “the link between racism and sexism” and that the “victimization” in the novel appears to “function in a historical and causal vacuum”. Further, he concludes that because the types of oppressions that are portrayed are distanced from their actual historical context, i.e. from the bodies of Black slaves, the novel “drifts from speculative fiction, which is anchored in reality, into conceptually suspect and politically hazardous fantasy.” In agreement with Merriman, law scholar Melayna Williams (2017) delivers an indictment of both the novel and the TV series, concluding that they are “decidedly not in line with an inclusive feminism” despite engaging with “undeniable feminist themes”. Her critique is directed broadly at the readings of both texts as feminist, something she ascribes to “mainstream, ahistorical and dangerous understandings of both oppression and feminism” which neglect the experiences of women of colour. In short, reiterating Merriman’s critique, she issues a reminder that the unthinkable speculative fiction of white women’s oppression that the story is built around has long been a tangible reality for people of colour – specifically, one might add, at the hands of white people. As noted, white supremacy and racism are themes which are clearly present in the novel. These themes are even more explicitly stated in the film, and quite differently handled in the TV series, and I will return to this in my analysis.

In the above pages, I have focused mainly on the previous research that, in one way or another, touches on power, complicity, oppression, and erasure. Building on this research and moving forward to examine and explore the three primary source texts as a whole in which the parts affect one another is an analytical process which I believe will bring new insights in the field, and further extend existing ones.

**Do They Want Radically Different Things? – Research questions**

As concluded in the paragraph above, despite the extent of the previous research into the novel and its story, characters, and events, I do find a gap when it comes to reading the novel, the film, and the TV series as an ”entangled” whole. I believe they should be read through one another, and that the ways they transform one another should be examined in order to address
some other gaps through an updated intersectional feminist view and a closer scrutiny of the positions from which utopian and dystopian ideas are imagined. Consequently, this is where my own research will be focused.

My main thesis questions are therefore:
- How does utopia/dystopia manifest in three versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale*?
- Are they imagined in the same world/with the same tools/the same imagination or do they want radically different things?

And as an addition: Can this be of political use/significance?

In order to answer these main questions, I will also need to answer some underlying ones:
- What is utopia, what is dystopia, how do they relate to one another?
- What is the possible political significance and potential of literary and cinematic utopia/dystopia?

When it comes to examining how utopia and dystopia manifest in the primary source texts, I will be looking at both form and content. I intend to examine how they are portrayed through violence and resistance, and how they relate to ideas of temporality and relationality, which are also central to both utopian and narrative theory – these concepts are, in my understanding, where the building blocks of dystopia and utopia imagined through *The Handmaid’s Tales* are to be found. All of these concepts are entangled, which is something else I will look at in my analysis. In addition, when looking at the potential for political use and significance, I mean to do that both in a personal and a broader sense as I conduct my search for utopian hope and queer horizons in the primary source texts.

**Queer as in Fuck You – Concepts**

I am using several concepts in this thesis which I will examine and discuss more extensively in the theory and methodology chapters. These are: UTOPIA (15, 25), DYSTOPIA (20, 25), DISIDENTIFICATION (27), ENTANGLEMENT (37), and DIFFRACTION (38). As for some of the more general concepts I use in this thesis, I will give a brief specification of my understanding and use of the word/s, below.

QUEER is a notoriously open-ended concept, which is meant, in a way, to defy fixed meanings. Defining it, therefore, seems to focus more on what it does than what it is; e.g. theoretical
physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad defines queer as “a radical questioning of identity and binaries” and something that “displaces a host of deeply-held foundational dualisms” (Barad in Juelskjær & Schwennesen 2012, p. 18); feminist scholar Noreen Giffney enlists the understandings of queer theorists Judith Butler and Lee Edelman, and archaeologist Thomas A. Dowson, to make the case for queer as a term that emphasises unconventional thinking and lifestyles; a term which should remain unfixed so as to maintain its location as outside of or against the normative (which, in itself, is changeable) (2004, pp. 73-74). Queer theorist Jack Halberstam similarly emphasises the idea of queer as “eccentric” or non-normative life practices that defy heteronormative life conventions (2003, p. 1). I find it important, here, to specifically emphasise Halberstam’s defiance of heteronormativity as central to this radical questioning, displacement of binaries, unconventional thinking and lifestyles, and, queer as something deeply connected to embodiment and experiences of dissident sexualities and genders.

INTERSECTIONALITY is the understanding that people’s lives are simultaneously affected by multiple different power structures that interact and displace one another differently in different situations (Lykke 2010, p. 208). The term was coined by law scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and is one of the theoretical tools that have helped challenge ideas of universal subjects and struggles, within feminism. While the term intersectionality has been criticised for being “too static a tool”, as the image of the intersection gives an idea of clearly separable identity categories that meet at a given point and then go on their separate ways again, a poststructuralist understanding instead sees the categorisations as entangled (Lykke 2010, p. 73). As my definition above shows, I will use the concept in a more entangled sense.

CIS/CISHETEROSEXIST. The three source texts I am studying portray a society which enforces a violent heterosexual paradigm, and while the texts do acknowledge other sexualities, they are binary in the extreme and do not problematise this in any way. I include this section to declare my understanding of gender as a broad spectrum with an infinite number of identifications and embodiments in different states of fixity and fluidity. The term cis, taken from Latin, is, in contexts of gender, used to signify a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth (RFSL 2015). The term cisheterosexism will be used to signify the normative default assumption that people are either cis men or cis women, and heterosexual (a mix of cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions).
VIOLENCE. I use violence in this thesis as a broad understanding that incorporates conflict and peace researcher Johan Galtung’s triangle, i.e. direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence as different parts that affect and relate to one another. The different parts are understood as “physical or psychological violence that works on the body (direct); harmful discriminatory societal structures (structural); and culture working to legitimise direct and structural violence (cultural)” (Sehlin MacNeil 2017, p. 22). In other words, I believe that, for instance, a policy can be violent, or a dehumanising/stereotypical joke, in the ways they affect the lives of people, by extension.

HOPE. While philosopher Ernst Bloch stresses that hope is something that can always be disappointed, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz proposes that disappointment needs to be risked for the sake of hope (both in Muñoz 2009, p. 9). When I write about hope in this thesis, it is not a timid and grateful hope that accepts being alive as a substitute for living freely. I use hope as an active concept; it is a demand for rights and time and space. It is necessarily inclusive and intersectional, and it takes no prisoners. It will not be “tolerated” nor meet anyone’s ability to grasp human rights halfway.

Too Much is Not Enough – Limitations

I have chosen to undertake a research project with some quite vast entry points. As mentioned above, the research on Margaret Atwood’s writing in general, and The Handmaid’s Tale specifically, is very extensive. As a result, I am unable to engage with all the writings that have come before this thesis. Of course, this creates a risk of missing significant points. However, I have focused to the best of my ability on the texts that touch on the same areas I do and am hopeful that my contribution is sufficiently underpinned and independent. The area of utopian thought is also quite daunting in range. Again, I have attempted to leave the extensive history review to the experts and focused my attentions more on the specific strands of utopian research that I am engaging with in my analysis (postmodern, feminist, and queer). There are many helpful sources for this, thankfully, and I have done my best within the scope of this thesis to be thorough – but space and time are admittedly limited.

13 Galtung’s triangle has been criticised for being too broad, and open-ended (Sehlin MacNeil 2017, p. 22), but similarly to philosophy scholar Kristina Sehlin MacNeil, who uses it in research with indigenous peoples, I believe those are good qualities when looking at, as in this case, minority perspectives (such as queer) or disenfranchised groups (such as Handmaids in Gilead).

14 As previously mentioned, the academic research sources on the novel outweigh the ones on the film and TV series adaptions. However, as many of the themes, characters, and events are the same or similar, I do not feel that this is too great a hindrance to carrying out engaged analyses of all three primary source texts.
Another potential limitation is that I am engaging only with the novel, the film, and the first season of the TV series. It would have been interesting to bring other adaptions into the thesis as well, and season two of the TV series (which is set to air its first two episodes in the U.S. just in time for my 80% thesis deadline). As mentioned, I choose to leave the other adaptions out, with regard to scope and feasibility, and also because I am unable to study some of them in their entirety or intended form. With regard to the second season of the TV series, the first one ended just as Offred’s part of the novel ends, and so for comparative reasons, the first season seems to be an appropriate part to examine in conjunction with the novel and the film. As for the possible limitations of myself, I will examine them below.

The Thoughts of a Gender Traitor and Unwoman – Situating myself

I’m happy to subvert some of the suffocating categories of Gilead (and my current temporal and spatial locations) with my existence. I also, personally, need to find hopes and horizons in these texts. If life is to be worth living, there must be something beyond the thick fog of patriarchal white supremacist cisheterosexual extremism in the primary source texts, and in the world today. Queer hope and queer horizons; that’s where I draw my breath. These things must exist, and I know they do, but maybe, as so often in the past, it is across a river of blood.

I am a white cis person; I am middle-class; this thesis is (hopefully) the means to my third university degree. I could pass in all of these Gileads if I kept my head down. I would be perceived to be of use and able to navigate a commander’s household – perhaps even impress with my scrabble skills. At least until I couldn’t stand the loneliness anymore, and got involved with Ofglen, or until they found out that I couldn’t have children and punished me by chopping off my hands, hanging me on the wall, or sending me to clean up nuclear waste until I died. But would I? (Keep my head down, pass, acquiesce?) I would like to think not, but fear and possibility do strange things to people. I have run unarmed and screaming towards Nazis with sticks and shields, but I do not bring a book with Vaginal Creme Davis on the cover to the neighbourhood laundromat. My body knows complicity, and while I resent it, I can identify with Offred/Kate/June in many ways. I know what it is like to “wait it out” in moderate to grave discomfort, better safe than sorry. I know what it is like to afford complicity. My subversions are invisible; I am awarded the benefit of the doubt. This is significant.

15 As far as I am able to find out, the second season will mainly be concerned with the events following the end of Offred’s account in the novel (i.e. as of yet unwritten, or vaguely speculated on in the epilogue, and imagined in the film) and will not be directly concerned with the Historical Notes section of it (Hulu 2018).
This brief section of the thesis is to say that I will be looking upon the source texts, the theory, the methodology, and all of my questions from the partial perspective of a European middle-class academic with traditional training, an angry queer person, a voluntarily child-free person, and also as a person who does not see death as the worst thing that could ever happen to someone (myself, for instance). I anticipate that these things will affect my interpretations, as I know they affect my own hope and resistance. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, I will be looking upon the research as a white person in a Western, white majority country. While I do my best to scrutinise the various locations and perspectives in my writing, reading, and awareness, and to engage with theories that will help challenge them, I also know that I cannot step out of them, which will affect my way of engaging with certain aspects of the criticism, the source texts, and their possible interpretations.

**Chapter 2: Theory**

**A Brief History of the Not-Here and Not-Yet – Utopia in Context**

The term utopia has a long history, and the idea of it an even longer one, and, while I will briefly outline the historical context of the concept and some of its uses here, this thesis is not foremost concerned with elaborating on this rich subject. Rather, I wish to set a foundation from which to look more closely at some particular strands of utopian thinking, which I intend to engage with in my analyses, namely postmodern, feminist, and queer utopias. So, I ask the reader to consider this first part a cursory overview which is meant only to provide context.

Philosopher Thomas More is responsible for coining the term *utopia* with his seminal work of the same name, published in 1516. A quick etymological note means mentioning that More blended two Greek prefixes and added them to the word for place (*topos*). One was *eu*, creating *eutopia*, or good place, and one was *ou* creating *outopia*, or no place; together, as *utopia*, they create something like “the good place which is nowhere” (Bartkowski 1989, p. 4; Levitas 1990, p. 2; Sargent 2010, p. 2). (In that sense, a displacement – temporal or spatial – seems an integral part of the concept, and I will examine this more closely below.) I will not dwell on More’s intentions, but simply conclude that my understanding of the *word* as such then becomes “the good place which is nowhere”.

While much of utopian thinking and ideas necessarily take on the written form, professor of political science Lyman Tower Sargent (2010) notes three main categories of utopianism:
Literary utopia, utopian practice (such as “intentional communities”), and utopian social theory (e.g. studying the relationship between utopia and ideology, using utopia as a “method of analysis”) (pp. 5-7). Both literary utopia and utopian social theory take on a narrative form, as they fictionalise or theorise a better place/time than the here and now, and the latter evolved out of the former (Manuel & Manuel 1979, p. 4; Sargent 2010, p. 7). I will engage with both, below. I will not, however, venture any further into the world of “intentional communes”. Before I begin, I will acknowledge that while my summary in many ways takes a linear chronological form, life and thought usually do not – so even though I offer a brief historiography here which engages in a traditional way with canonised European works, the history of utopian thought is neither this simple, this clearly distinguishable in periods and strands, nor this linear.

More’s *Utopia* (1516) describes the discovery of an unknown island with, presumably, in the author’s mind, a far better society than his contemporary one (in this case a strict, hierarchical, patriarchal one). Sargent concludes that the characteristics of literary utopias are that they tell stories about better places “representing them as if they were real” (2010, p. 4). While More’s publication was, as it were, the inception of the word, the idea of utopia or an imagined better place/life/society, has a much longer history. In fact, Sargent means that the idea can be found in written form as far back as there are preserved written records, mentioning a 2000 BCE Sumerian clay tablet (ibid.). Somewhat more recent, Plato’s *Republic* is generally considered to be the “fount of Western utopianism” (ibid., p. 17). Much literature on utopia, utopianism, and their history is Eurocentric and Western focused, and this is attributed, in part, to the accessibility of written records/the abundance of genre texts in the West, as well as the fact that the term has Western origins (Manuel & Manuel 1979, pp. 9-10; Gordin, Tilley & Prakash 2010, p. 3). 20th and 21st century researchers do point out the many utopian types of traditions globally (e.g. Manuel & Manuel 1979, p. 1; Levitas 1990, p. 1; Sargent 2010, p. 126; Gordin, Tilley & Prakash 2010, p. 13; Ingram 2016, p. xxvii) and there is more transnational, and post-colonial research being carried out.17 Due to the focus of this thesis, I will continue to engage with the sources that outline a Western literary and theoretical tradition in utopianism as my primary source texts belong within this canon.

---

16 Sargent stresses that its definition must have “porous boundaries” as contemporary literary utopias differ a great deal from classic ones (2010, pp. 5-6). Professor of history Frank E. Manuel and researcher Fritzie Manuel similarly emphasise that “the perimeters of the concept of utopia have to be left hazy” as it has “plural meanings” (1979, p. 5).

17 E.g. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Luise White, Francisco Fernández Buey.
One point most scholars seem to be in agreement on is that any utopia/dystopia is mainly concerned with the time in which it was written – or, to some extent, read – rather than the past or future in which it is set (e.g. Manuel & Manuel 1979, pp. 8-10; Bartkowski 1989, p. 4; Mohr 2005, p. 15; Sargent 2010, p. 21; Gordin, Tilley & Prakash 2010, p. 1, p. 4). In utopian and dystopian writing, the temporal location is an important aspect of the function and possibility of the idea. From the not-now of the past, to the not-yet of the future, from the not-here of the terrestrial but unknown islands, valleys, and cities, to the here-but-not-yet transformed familiar spaces, to the neither-here-nor-yet of the extra-terrestrial future – utopia is always out of reach. Yet, it is necessarily imagined from somewhere. Historians Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash see the time-space aspects as the “conditions of possibility” of a given utopia/dystopia, concluding that “[u]topian visions are never arbitrary” (2010, p. 4), i.e. the extrapolation or vision of a writer outlines the realm of possibilities that they write from. Philosophers Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno are also deeply engaged with the temporal aspects of utopia. Bloch, commenting on the move from spatial distance to temporal distance, says that when utopia is “transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but utopia itself is also not with itself. This island does not even exist. But it is not something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not yet in the sense of a possibility” (1988, p. 3). He finds the future to be the thing that saves the idea of utopia, and that the function of it hinges on going beyond the present and into the realm of possibility (which is necessarily future): “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers” (ibid., p. 12). Adorno similarly emphasises the temporal displacement, connecting the necessity of it to wish-fulfilment (which always “takes something away from the substance of the wishes”), concluding that a utopia today would only be a today and possibility would still be at a distance (in Bloch 1988, pp. 1-2). In other words, both Bloch and Adorno assert that utopia/possibility is always necessarily temporally displaced.

The location of utopia is also significant, not only in what it says about the lifestyle that is being imagined – rural, traditional, pastoral, urban, industrial, technological – but also in what it says about the imagined frontiers of possibility, and the connection between the reader’s location and the location of utopia. The local perspective of the classic and literary utopia, becomes a globalised perspective in the later literature and social theory – however, all of these have predominantly been imagined from a white, mostly male, Eurocentric position (in the prolific, canonised, and infamous, texts). Sargent mentions the utopian “dilemma” (2010, p. 8) connected to perspective and exclusion – who decides what the better society is, and for whom
is it better (ibid., p. 105)? In early utopian writing, the thinking was concerned only with the lives of free men, not with other free people, or slaves, and Socrates even specified that “demeaning labour” was to be carried out by “non-citizens” in order to let the citizens (i.e. aforementioned free men) lead an ideal contemplative life (ibid., p. 19). Most classic utopias are based on exclusions and marginalisations. For instance, a lot of utopian writing in the first half of the 20th century was explicitly based on the emerging field of eugenics and on strong nationalist tendencies (ibid., pp. 27-28), and the costs of those lines of thinking, as we have been repeatedly reminded, can be tallied in innumerable deaths.

Unsurprisingly, utopianism was treated with suspicion after World Wars I and II and has continued to be so throughout the 20th century. It was considered to have been “fatally compromised by its association with totalitarian political projects” and “came to be perceived as irresponsibly and actively dangerous” (Ingram 2016, p. xii). In the 1930s, utopia was declared dead, but it did not disappear, rather it was approached in new ways (Manuel & Manuel 1979, p. 10). In the wake of the totalitarian projects and their consequences, dystopia became “the dominant form of utopian literature” (Sargent 2010, p. 26) and while the genre still flourished, it was different; “chastened” with an awareness that affecting change for the better “would not be easy” (ibid., p. 30). The subsequent post-war optimism, civil rights movements, sexual liberation, student movements, and booming economies in the West, however, proved a fertile breeding ground for utopian thinking, and the 1960s, and adjacent years included in that general zeitgeist, saw an “upsurge”, and the birth of two new strands of utopian writing, which have proven very prolific – the environmental and the feminist utopia (ibid., pp. 30-31). Initiating a displacement of the traditional humanist Eurocentric focus, these strands are instrumental to the postmodern shift in utopian thinking – away from absolutes, essentialism, and clear binary boundaries.

This section has shown that the “porous boundaries” and “hazy perimeters” that Sargent (2010, pp. 5-6) and historian Frank E. Manuel and researcher Fritzie Manuel (1979, p. 5) mention are inevitable for a term so widely and variedly employed as utopia. Despite many useful discussions and descriptions, there are no absolute definitions, and no complete consensus as to what it should mean. Thankfully, not only the term itself but also the possible perspectives and building blocks of utopian ideas have been similarly challenged to allow for expanded haze and porousness through postmodern and feminist interventions.
Reimagining the boundaries – Postmodern, Feminist, and Queer Utopias

The seeds of postmodernist reimaginings of utopia can be said to have started to form in the post-war period through the destabilisation of traditional Eurocentric humanist certainties and a new era of doubt, as evident in Bloch’s understanding of hope as “the opposite of security. […] If it could not be disappointed, it would not be hope” (1988, p. 16) and Adorno’s insistence on the deceptive (ultimately disappointing) quality of wish-fulfilment (in Bloch 1988, p. 1). Returning to the optimistic “upsurge” commented on above, philosophy scholar Raffaella Baccolini and literary scholar Tom Moylan (2003) describe how the “oppositional political culture” of the 1960s and 1970s “occasioned a revival of distinctly eutopian writing” for the first time since the end of the 19th century. Some aspects of this writing were maintaining flaws of human life even in the envisioned utopia and “forging visions of better but open futures”, in other words, a focus that turns away from perfection and closure. Through such means, “these writings developed a critique of dominant ideology and traced new vectors of opposition” (p. 2). This shows that already by the mid-to-late 20th century, visions of the better place, or better time, or better life, were turning towards multiplicity, and open-endedness, calling traditional ideas of objective truth into question.

While Baccolini and Moylan go on to declare that the “utopian moment faded” by the 1980s (ibid.), the critical stance towards ideas of utopia and dystopia remained. Here, Sargent and Baccolini and Moylan agree that the already porous and hazy definitions become even more difficult, as there is a great deal of intermingling of dystopian and utopian tendencies. Sargent sees both these components clearly in the new dystopias of the 1980s and proposes calling them critical dystopias (Sargent in Baccolini & Moylan 2003, p. 3). Moylan had already previously approached the term critical utopias where “critical” was to be understood as relating to critique in the traditional sense, to “a postmodern attitude of self-reflexivity”, and “to the political implication of a ‘critical mass’” needed to affect change (Moylan in Baccolini & Moylan 2003, p. 2). Both these definitions show that the idea of an uncomplicated utopia of yore has been displaced by utopian and dystopian ideas that fluidly intermingle to interrogate and problematise the very idea of good and bad, and to challenge dominant perspectives.

As the utopian upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s happened, a corresponding fade in dystopian writing had occurred, but “the power of its counter-narrative” had a comeback in the 1980s, as mentioned above. Baccolini and Moylan conclude that “dystopia’s potential for exploring
utopian possibilities in bad times” was what led many writers to the genre at the time. They also mention the “powerful anti-utopian campaign” (“the end of radical social dreaming and the achievement of an instantaneous ‘utopia’ of the market”) of that time as another reason for the rising popularity of dystopia (2003, pp. 6-7). Anti-utopian, importantly, is not the same as dystopian, rather it is that which is “opposed to the utopian impulse” (Sargent in Baccolini & Moylan 2003, p. 5), an “anti-critical” stance, unwilling to imagine betterment outside the here and now and the current ideological paradigm. Dystopias (specifically new, critical ones) are “texts that maintain a utopian impulse” (ibid., pp. 7-8). Whereas traditional dystopias have “little space for hope within the story” and mainly present depressing scenarios where the reader needs to be the one to heed the warning of the text to “escape its pessimistic future” the new critical dystopias instead imbed hope within the story itself by “resist[ing] closure” (ibid.). In addition to this open-endedness, there is a great deal of genre-blurring and hybridity in the new critical works, and I find it worth quoting Baccolini and Moylan at some length as they attribute this to feminist theory and critique:

Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions […] and recognizing the importance of difference, multiplicity, and complexity, of partial and situated knowledges, as well as hybridity and fluidity, the critical utopias resist genre purity in favour of an impure or hybrid text […]. Thus, it is the very notion of an _impure_ genre, with permeable borders which allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology that reduces everything to a global monoculture. (Baccolini & Moylan 2003, pp. 7-8)

This quote summarises key critical aspects of new (post-war, pre-next-war, post-and-pre-genocide, mid-capitalist, mid-some-war, post-humanist, post-colonial) utopian and dystopian writing and understanding, and provides examples of key thoughts in feminist examinations of utopia.

Looking at feminism and utopia historically, according to Bartkowski, the “question of women in utopia” has always been asked (as far back as More), but only been “summarily answered” in showing a situation where women were marginally better off than in the author’s time and place, but where they were never involved in the construction of utopia. Also, while there were a number of all-female utopias written in the 19th century, they were mostly “far from feminist” and often focused on “the ‘true’ woman of the domestic sphere, rather than the ‘new’ woman” (1989, p. 9). In terms of somewhat later writing, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s _Herland_ from 1915 is seen as “the prototype for later feminist utopias” while Monique Wittig’s _Les Guérillères_ from 1969 is considered “the first example” of a utopia that “appeared in response to the women’s liberation movement” (ibid., p. 16). Bartkowski sees utopian feminist writing as “a
place where theories of power can be addressed through the construction of narratives that test and stretch the boundaries of power in its operational details” (ibid., p. 5). This can be related to the imaginings of both utopian and dystopian power structures – examining how a feminist deconstruction of hierarchies and challenging of societal values would be practically arranged, or, indeed, extrapolating from patriarchal tendencies in the present to imagine the worst consequences of them. The latter is what The Handmaid’s Tale is an example of, and while it is set in the future of speculative fiction, the nightmarish consequences of Gileadean society are all out of the past, making the point that feminist dystopia need not be imagined at all.

Literary scholars Sarah W. Goodwin and Libby Falk Jones describe a sort of core of feminist utopian thinking when they identify the difficulty of “finding a common vision of a better world” and declare that “[o]ne woman’s utopia is another’s nightmare; feminism itself takes on a range of meanings” (1990, p. ix). This thinking echoes earlier interrogations of the concept of utopia in its ideological political incarnations and stresses the limitations of prescriptive versions of it. It also touches on the importance of intersectional understandings of feminist theories. Seconding Goodwin and Falk Jones and their lack of faith in one “common vision”, feminist and utopian scholar Lucy Sargisson (2000) argues for a “transgressive utopia”, saying “[t]here is no utopia of perfection here. There is only space for further exploration” (p. 152). Sargisson also notes that feminist utopian thought puts forth “a critique of the equation of perfection with closure”, rejecting the “standard views” and the “blueprint” ideas of classic utopian thought (1996, p. 2). The resistance against closure that Sargisson mentions is crucial in creating permeable borders and fluid possibilities – if it is to be critical, collaborative, and hopeful, utopia cannot be completed. It must be allowed to continue to create itself forward without locking into a preconceived destination. It must come “with the recognition of unpredictable, unseen, or unacknowledged possible futures” (Wagner-Lawlor 2013, p. x), which clarifies the proposed rejection of closure as a statement of potential.

Related to potential and possibility, one of the ways I find utopia/dystopia to be represented in The Handmaid’s Tales is through resistance. Sociologist Ruth Levitas comments that “whatever we think of particular utopias, we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies” (1990, p. 8). This understanding of

---

utopia as existing in the generated but unfulfilled desires of a situation connects to my understanding of resistance as a representation of utopia in the source texts. Acts and thoughts of resistance become manifestations of utopia (desire/potential/hope/possibility) under the dystopian living conditions of Gilead. Desiring something other than the present reality is an act of hope, and, daring to hope is an act of resistance. Any revolt – be it quiet defiance or radical acts of violence – destabilises the totality of dystopia and connects the characters to possibility and hope.

The concepts of open-endedness, transgression, and possibility in the above paragraphs relate to ideas of utopia and temporality (utopia as necessarily displaced in time) that have been mentioned previously. Bartkowski connects feminism and utopia temporally in yet another way when she claims that “[f]eminist fiction and feminist theory are fundamentally utopian in that they declare that which is not-yet as the basis for a feminist practice, textual, political, or otherwise” (1989, p. 12). Here, the displacement in time (not-yet – potential; possibility; hope) equates feminist fiction and theory with the utopian. Building on the ideas of postmodern and feminist utopias, I will continue by examining the idea of queer utopia as articulated by José Esteban Muñoz (2009), who makes a similar connection between the queer and the not-yet. Again, neither queerness nor queer utopia magically appear in a neat linear progressive after these other strands of thinking, but I end on this note as it is the point of theory from which I wish to examine the primary source texts in this thesis.

To me, a queer, Muñoz’s writing on the queer utopia is in itself like a blossoming abundance of hope and sorrow (the sorrow is always, because the queerness is not-yet), and I choose to quote at some length in the hopes of conveying some of this abundance to the reader:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. […] We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. […] Queerness is a longing that propels us. […] Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. (2009, p. 1)

This passage puts words to many of my own personal longings and illustrates to me the connectivity and necessity I experience in queerness. The dispersed, long-distance (both spatially and temporally) collective that is my chosen family and the pieces of my own queer self. The undeniable not-yet-here in the face of my equally undeniable existence. The ways that
I long for the queer horizon not because it is promising but because it is necessary. This is precisely how I understand hope, and utopia.

In his theorising on queer utopia, Muñoz engages with Bloch’s writing, especially on the point of hope. Muñoz declares that “Bloch offers us hope as a hermeneutic” and that he himself considers the idea of hope, “which is both a critical affect and a methodology” as central to his writing on queer utopia (ibid., p. 4). One of the things/phenomena/feelings/reparations I am looking for in my three source texts is hope, and Muñoz’s reading and expansion of Bloch’s understanding of the concept offers me the tools to explore it (explore as in search for; as in try on; as in enact). Muñoz writes that, “[a]s Bloch would insist, hope can be disappointed. But such disappointment needs to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted” (ibid., p. 9), insisting on hope as a possibility worth the risk and a necessity for reaching the not-yet-here. If we are not yet queer, the only way we have at our disposal to reach our future selves is hope. According to Muñoz, theorists of the antiutopian conviction might see themselves as “critical in rejecting hope” but only because they miss the point “in the rush to denounce it” – the point “that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naïve but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present” (ibid., p. 12). This resonates with my own understanding of hope as a mode of resistance which is active, invested, and demanding; a way to refuse hostile presents.

Because he places utopia (queerness) in the not-yet Muñoz, like Bloch, is deeply engaged with ideas of temporality. This is not a point of consensus among queer theorists; Edelman (2004), for instance, points to futurity as something inseparable from heteronormative ideas of procreation and to queerness as only possible in the now (I will return to Edelman in the methodology chapter). Muñoz opposes Edelman by arguing that “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope” and by insisting that “queerness is always in the horizon” (ibid., p. 11). I interpret this insistence as related to the impossibility of queerness in the present; the way it means rejections, violence, invisibility, conditioned existences. It must be on the horizon both because it cannot be here and now, and because it needs to promise us from somewhere. Reconnecting to Bloch and his focus on the no-longer-conscious and not-yet Muñoz makes a case for a queer temporality that extends beyond the single moment:

This temporal calculous performed and utilized the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity (ibid., p. 12)
The queer utopia dawning on the horizon, and the queer past futures of others, thus become part of these armaments against erasure, resignation, and assimilation.

In connection with temporality, Muñoz also engages with the idea of relationality. He admits to being “critical of the communitarian as an absolute value and of its negation as an alternative all-encompassing value” calling instead for queerness “to be grasped as both antirelational and relational” (ibid., pp. 10-11). He reads the antirelational as connected to the antiutopian, being based in a complete focus on the here and now (ibid., p. 14). I understand that “here and now” as being a totality which does not allow for radical reimaginings of the world, thus shutting down futurity and becoming the site of a reckless abandon (with which I also see the point, in a queer sense). That “here and now” may have its benefits for those who have no hope of fitting into the majority norm but could also mean creating oneself as ahistorical and unaccountable, disconnected. Similarly, a complete focus on community could push queerness in a normalising, assimilatory direction. With my understanding of the relational and antirelational, I thus align myself with Muñoz’s ambiguity. From a different time, Bartkowski (unambiguously) argues, quoting Raymond Williams, that “community is the keyword of the ‘entire utopian mode’” (1989, p. 5). As noted above, in classical utopias this would mean a very limited group of people, whereas in postmodern feminist thinking, community can be differently constructed. For example, Baccolini and Moylan read critical dystopias as an “exploration of agency that is based in difference and multiplicity yet cannily reunited in an alliance politics that speaks back in a larger though diverse collective voice” (2003, p. 8). In other words, a commitment to the whole (which is ever-changing) without disregarding different parts of the multiplicity; a flexible relationality. While Muñoz is unwilling to reject the antirelational completely, seeing it important contributions to queer theory, he also emphasises “the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” (2009, p. 11). To this end, he calls for the “anti-antirelational” which, importantly, is not simply the relational, but what he calls the “singular plural” of queerness (ibid., p. 15). I read this singular plural as a possibility for dispersed community; a connectedness which is not necessarily spoken or specified; relations to unknown queers in the future and from the past; the collective as potential and on the horizon.

Muñoz concludes by saying that while queerness “is not yet here […] it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality” and that “we must give in to its propulsion, its status as a
destination” (ibid., p. 185). Like the opening quote, this, too, fills me with hope and a sense of making out utopia in the far distance, as a promise and an inevitability, and a not-yet-here. It reminds me to keep the horizon in view, so that I can show it to the next queer and they can show it to me, just as when we meet randomly out in the world, recognising one another’s queerness and revelling in instant, momentary kinship.

Utopia/Eutopia/Outopia/Dystopia/Utopia – Concept relationships
In the previous sections, I have both noted the many variations of interpretations of utopia as a term and as theory/literature and elaborated on some of the existing interpretations. I will briefly note some more options here and conclude this subchapter by attempting to specify my use of terminology connected to utopia/dystopia in this thesis. As a start, I would like to address the interconnectedness of utopia and dystopia as concepts. The term dystopia is believed to first have been used in 1747 (Sargent 2010, p. 4).19 It is formulated as the apparent opposite of utopia, but that notion is debatable. Here, I turn to Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, as I find their linking of utopia and dystopia as a “nexus with three points” (utopia-dystopia-chaos) significant (2010, p. 2). Like Baccolini and Moylan, they assert that dystopia is not antiutopia in the meaning of its opposite, but, where their reasoning is structural (the opposite of utopia, a beneficial place which is perfectly planned, is a place which is perfectly unplanned, whereas dystopia is an unjust place which is perfectly planned), Baccolini and Moylan instead refer to the way all dystopias maintain the utopian impulse and utopian hope, components that are absent from antiutopia, as it rejects the utopian impulse (2003, p. 7, p. 5). Notably, Atwood herself argues for a co-mingling of utopia and dystopia into the term utopia20 to emphasise the impossibility of separating the two entirely (2011, p. 66). In combination, I find that these arguments support a use of the words utopia and dystopia as entangled concepts, that somehow always imply one another and cannot be entirely disassociated. I will use them in this thesis separately, or together (as utopia/dystopia), with the notion of their mutual entanglement and occasional interchangeability at the forefront. When it comes to the idea of utopia, beyond the word itself, beyond the “good place which is nowhere”, I will rely heavily on my understanding of it through postmodern, feminist, and, especially, queer theory. To me, this means emphasising critical awareness, resistance to closure, the singular plural, and hope. Utopia in this understanding becomes the good place which remains unfixed, open-ended, and

19 By Henry Lewis Younge in his Utopia; or Apollo’s Golden Days (Sargent 2010, p. 4).
20 I will not use ustopia as a term despite the fact that I draw on Atwood’s arguments, because I still find it useful to be able to distinguish between the hopeful possibility of “the good place”, and the “bad place” as the manifestation of its failure or singularity of focus.
transformable; the good place which offers connectivity across time; the good place as a promise, as that which is not yet but remains possible.

**Fictional Manifestos for Change – Art, entertainment and utopia**

As utopia/dystopia is necessarily in the temporal or spatial distance, in effect, it exists in representational form. One of the points I wish to examine in this thesis is whether fictional utopias/dystopias - *The Handmaid’s Tale* in particular – can have any political use and potential; if they can affect change. For this purpose, I will briefly account for some opinions and arguments regarding the impact that utopia in art and entertainment can have.

Mohr declares that utopian literature “intends to move readers to a critical awareness” (2005, p. 17) and Sargent concludes that utopia can “transform hope and desire into belief and action” (2010, p. 124). Both these quotes can be related to *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the sense of the dystopian warning as well as a reminder of historic oppressions (i.e. their plausibility) bringing awareness, and perhaps belief. Haas, Christensen and Haas write on political films/films with political messages, and while they concede that there is always a risk of only reaching audience members that are already aligned with the message, they also argue that “movies affect specific political behavior”, “movies contribute to general social and political learning, including affective patterns”, and that they “spark public debate” and media interest (2015, pp. 19-20). Much of the press surrounding all three releases of the source texts does engage with the political content, concerning itself specifically with the plausibility of events\(^\text{21}\) and it is clear that through the years since the first publication, the source texts have created some kind of critical awareness reaching beyond their status as art or entertainment.

I have referred to Caminero-Santangelo above, who views mass culture as the only possible location for resistance, while calling out the complicity with it that she sees in the novel (1994, p. 88). I interpret this as the idea of a resistance necessarily from within because there is no without. Film scholar Richard Dyer problematises this by saying that

the ideals of entertainment imply wants that capitalism itself promises to meet. […]

The categories of sensibility point to gaps or inadequacies in capitalism, but only those gaps or inadequacies that capitalism proposes itself to deal with. At our worst sense of it, entertainment provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism (1985, pp. 228-229)

\(^{21}\) E.g. Gray 1986; Greene 1986; Emerson 1990; Lawrence 1990; Williams, L E 2017; Ryan, M 2017.
This theory shows the limitations of mass culture representations providing a constant proposal for “change within” that changes nothing and obscures the view of radically different alternatives. Muñoz offers a strategy for decoding and going beyond this type of hegemonic discourse through disidentification, which I will examine below.

**Butler and Muñoz: Disidentification**

Judith Butler is credited with coining the term *disidentification* in a queer theoretical context. She describes it as an “experience of misrecognition” and an “uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong” (1993, p. 219). In other words, fitting in with one societal category (e.g. “woman”) but not with its implied constituting parts (e.g. “heterosexual” or “white”), which then produces a simultaneous position within and without, which, in Butler’s words, in turn, creates unease. However, Butler does not see disidentification as something passively negative (a resigned non-belonging) but as a potential starting-point for “affirmation of internal difference” (in a multiple movement like feminism, for example) (ibid.). That an acknowledgement of differences coupled with a partial alignment, where possible, can expand the reach and the impact of such movements is richly evidenced by the vital contributions of women of colour and queers to feminist theory and the problematisation of the universal feminist subject.

Building on Butler and other feminist theorists (e.g. Gloria Anzaldúa; Cherrie Moraga; Chela Sandoval; Norma Alarcón), Muñoz expands the concept of disidentification in a study of queer performance artists of colour (1999). More than a basis for coming to terms with failure to identify/failure to represent, Muñoz advocates for using disidentification to actively empower minority subjects:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture (1999, p. 31)

---

22 Muñoz writing is focused on “subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny” (1999, p. 5) and it is important for me to once again acknowledge that my own identity is formed in the repressive logics of two (misogyny, heteronormativity), but in the beneficial logics of one (white supremacy). Benefiting from this cultural logic means that the ways I am affected by the other two are also affected. Despite this, I will engage with Muñoz’s definitions of disidentification, as I find it highly useful for my research purposes, and this note is to acknowledge that I do so with an awareness of my limited scope of understanding.
It is a thinking that allows a subject to trace parts of their unthinkable identity through the majority culture, and to form points of contact with the idea of a collective somewhere out there through deciphered signs. Muñoz gives an example from a performance that resonates with his own experiences: actress Marga Gomez is shown lesbians on TV as a child. They are made out to be deviants, and their lifestyle shocking, but in her eyes (rehabilitating/reconfiguring/recycling the images), they are full of promises of future and happiness. Disidentification with the judgemental normative portrayal or expectations around them allows Gomez to form connections with her own identity, to self-create, through these deviants poking holes in the mainstream.

In conclusion, then, my use of the term disidentification in this thesis will perhaps be best described as a conglomeration of my understanding of Butler’s use (as a partial alignment) and Muñoz’s (as a rehabilitating performance); I will employ it to selectively empathise with the embodiments of privileged feminism in the main protagonist, to empower subversion in silenced characters, and to discern the fragility of Gilead as an oppressive system. It will be a key perspective in my focus on three texts mired in complicity, oppression, and misogyny with the purpose of finding utopian hope and queer horizons. This, in itself, represents rehabilitation and survival strategies for me, in- and outside of the texts.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Grids, Patterns and Constitutive Features – Narrative analysis

Narrative theory, or narratology, has its roots in literary theory, linguistics, and semiotics. Its foundational thoughts can be traced to Russian formalism and French structuralism, examining the narrative structure and its components, and focusing on the form of a narrative rather than its content (Chatman 1978; Onega and García Landa 1996; Czarniawska 2004). In fact, in terms of formalism, the form is seen as a “constituent of content and integral to the production of meaning” if not, for some formalists, “the constitutive feature of the literary text” (Cohen 2017). This is taking a step away from earlier literary theory (e.g. the idea of the author as one with the text/the text as a reflection of reality/the text as an arena for psychological enactment). Through formalism, the text becomes separate from the author, and from any intentions that they may have had, and theorists find meaning in studying it as something other than an invisible medium for content. Through structuralism, this interest in form is linguistically and

---

23 Warhol and Lanser comment narrative theory/narratology that “[w]ithin the field, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the systematic study of how narrative forms make meaning”, and I will allow myself the same interchangeable use in this thesis (2015, pp. 1-2).
semiotically systematised. Structuralism “looks for underlying elements in culture and literature that can be connected” in order that theorists may “develop general conclusions about the individual works and the systems from which they emerge”, and structuralist theorists further believe that “since language exists in patterns, certain underlying elements are common to all human experiences” and that these common experiences can be seen in the patterns (Brizée et al., 2018). The objective of narratology, according to narratologist Seymour Chatman, “is a grid of possibilities, through the establishment of the minimal narrative constitutive features” (1978, p. 19). Chatman goes on to account for some of these features, for instance, in structuralism, the story/histoire which is made up of the events that take place in combination with the “existents (characters, items of setting)” and the discourse/discours which is to say, “the expression, the means by which the content is communicated”. In formalist terms, the same kind of understanding was instead labelled “the ‘fable’ (fabula), or basic story stuff” and “the ‘plot’ (sjužet), the story actually told by linking the events together” (ibid., pp. 19-20).

Of significance to this thesis are the temporal aspects of narrative theory. As an example, the aforementioned terms relate to different temporalities of narrative, where the story/histoire/fabula is chronological and causal, but the discourse/discours/sjužet/plot may be organised by other temporal structures, “it is the difference between the time implied by the chronological happenings of the story and the time that reshapes that story in the telling” (Martin 2016). While these are some of the basic terms and understandings of that which is commonly referred to as classical narratology, i.e. narratology based in structuralist and formalist ideas, I find them useful for my analysis of the source texts.25

As I will attempt a brief historical overview of narrative theory below, I find it important to note that the many different strands of narrative theory are not sequentially arranged; it is not a case of one theoretical idea replacing another, but rather a matter of different theoretical viewpoints with multiple lines of thinking existing simultaneously. Additionally, while narratology was initially strictly applied to literature, the scope eventually broadened, and narrative theory is currently used in a range of fields – political science, economics, law, natural sciences, social sciences, to name a few (Onega & García Landa 1996; Czarniawska 2004). Although narratology did not have its heyday until the 20th century with the development of

24 Narrative is necessarily temporal, as it relates to a sequence of events: “Time is not a strictly literary category, yet literature is unthinkable without time. The events of a story unfold over time” (Martin 2016).

25 Some scholars find that the greatest legacy of classical narratology is, in fact, the extensive terminology, which is still used widely today (Onega & García Landa 1996; Warhol & Lanser 2015).
formalism and structuralism, analysing and theorising about narrative has its origins in early literary theory. Literary scholars Susana Onega and José Ángel García Landa explain that classical focus of theory was on treaties and drama, and on the rhetoric form. During the renaissance and enlightenment, where the classical treaties were re-read, there was a development of the discussions on formal issues; while there was a strong focus on genre conventions and rules, and the theorising was often “prescriptive” there was also analytical development in the refinement of dramatic concepts. Moving forward to the novel, theorising about it was underdeveloped in the early days of the genre (the 17th and 18th centuries). As an early theory of the novel was eventually formulated, it was mainly in the vein of 19th century “realist aesthetics”, and while the lyric was considered “an expression of the poet’s feelings” the novel was still considered to mostly be concerned with mirroring reality. Henry James changed that when he concluded that the novel could “reveal to us the inner life of characters” and made a distinction between voice and point of view (Onega & García Landa 1996, pp. 15-19). A great deal of focus had been on the author, and the text as a product and even extension of the author, but with early modernism came a “new dramatic autonomy of the novel” which meant taking a turn towards the content as its own world worthy of analysis (ibid., pp. 21-22). This would bring changes in many facets of the literary world.

In the 1920s and 1930s there was a critical revolution against the aesthetics of romanticism, and through modernism came such theoretical strands as New Criticism and formalism, where the theorists “criticized literature in terms of its structural complexity, not in terms of its immediate fidelity to life” (ibid.). The focus was not on events and story, but wholly concentrated on language and imagery, and different modes of representation of emotional states or themes. Arriving, then, at the different starting points of classical narratology, Onega and García Landa describe the beginnings of formalism as the influence of German and Polish critics on Russian formalists, but they go on to say that “the systematic and functional approach to form developed by Shklovski, Propp or Tomashevski is considered by many as the inaugural statement of narratology proper” (ibid., p. 23). Social anthropologist Barbara Czarniawska describes how Russian formalists, and then post-formalists (such as semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin) continued to develop narrative analysis after the publication of literary scholar Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928. Literary scholars James Phelan and Peter

---

26 Defining narrative in a broader sense it is “the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way”. In a narrower definition narrative would be “an exclusively linguistic phenomenon, a speech act, defined by the presence of a narrator or teller and a verbal text” (Onega & García Landa 1996, pp. 3-4). The former definition would include a wide variety of texts and speech-acts, while the latter would exclude, for example, non-verbal semiotic representations of events, such as films. For the purposes of this thesis I will be aligning myself with the broader definition of narrative.
J. Rabinowitz describe structuralist/formalist narratology as the “search for a stable landing, a theoretical bedrock of the fundamental and unchanging principles on which narratives are built” (2005, p. 1). Czarniawska also notes some specific developing lines of thought in literary theorists Northrop Frye’s and Robert Scholes’s focus on “universalist plots”, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Stauss’ and linguist Noam Chomsky’s search for “the invariable structure of the universal human mind” (2004, p. 2). These observations summarise both the structured foundation of narratology as a method of analysis, and its conceivably problematic desire for universals and absolutes.

The interest in narrative eventually spread beyond literary theory, as noted earlier in this chapter. Phelan and Rabinowitz define what is called the narrative turn as “the tendency for the term ‘narrative’ to cover a wider and wider territory” (2005, p. 2), and Czarniawska uses semiotologist and literary critic Roland Barthes, and his claim of “the central role of narratives in social life” in 1977 to show the move away from the stricter interpretation of what could be addressed through narrative theory and analysis (2004, p. 1). The narrative turn can be seen as both a consequence, and significant part, of the development of postmodern theory. Postmodern and poststructuralist thought meant a relaxation of basic assumptions and techniques of structuralist and formalist narrative analysis, as well as moving away from universalist understandings of the structure of language (ibid., p. 88) and abandoning that “theoretical bedrock” Phelan and Rabinowitz described (2005, p. 1). Czarniawska concludes that “both structural and poststructural analyses meant an important turn of the traditional hermeneutics: they managed to change the central question from ‘what does a text say?’ to ‘how does a text say it?’” (2004, p. 100). With poststructuralism came an additional intention of “finding out what a text does” (ibid., p. 88). As for that, Onega and García Landa account for some of the poststructuralist theories of reception, such as the view of narrative as a message between a sender and a receiver, and the emphasis placed on the “active and creative” aspects of reading and understanding (1996, p. 29). They further note that Barthes’s S/Z (1970) “is often considered as the opening statement of the post-structuralist analysis of narrative, which tends to emphasize the reader’s active manipulation of semiosis” (ibid., p. 5), in other words, an acknowledgement of the entanglement of text/reader/reception that moves away from the understanding of the text as separate and fixed, and interpretation as finite and universal. Communications professor Dennis K. Mumby (1993) turns to political theorist Fredric
Jameson’s notion of the *crisis of representation* and philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s thinking on *grand narratives* (both from 1984) to illustrate the postmodern development in narrative theory. According to Mumby, Jameson’s concept challenges “Cartesian notions of foundational Truth”, as well as the idea of “who gets to play a role in the constitution of societal meaning systems”, while Lyotard’s thinking rejects the credibility of traditional (large-scale/totalising) narratives, views knowledge “as searching for and creating instabilities in dominant views of the world”, and sees postmodern thought as “continuously challenging the stability of received knowledge” (pp. 2-3). This emphasises the move away from the stasis of charting rigidly specified components and into more dynamic and less statically definable territories. Perhaps symptomatically, poststructuralist literary theory is more difficult to outline in a unified manner than its structuralist predecessor, but there are some notable strands of theory that developed out of the rejection of structuralist ideas (and in the vein/s noted above) I will mention as examples deconstruction, semiotic theory, reader response/reception theory and gender theory – all focused on destabilising ideas of reality, language, and meaning (Brewton n.d.). For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the challenges brought to (and by) narratology by (and to) feminist and queer theories.

**Challenging the Centre and the Centric – Queer and feminist interventions**

Feminist narratology is, according to professors of English Robyn R. Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, a term “under pressure from two directions”, namely from those narratologists who find that “culturally invested and category-resistant approaches cannot properly be called narratological”, but also from gender and sexuality scholars “who remain suspicious of narratology’s formalist priorities and binary frames” (2015, p. 1). One “side” finds everything too loose, and the other everything too narrow; nevertheless, narrative, and queer and feminist theories are long since entwined and involved in one another’s developments. At the same time that classical narratology was “gaining its academic foothold”, feminist literary criticism was developing, especially in western Europe and the U.S. This theory was not only meant as an interpretive method, but also “as an inquiry into method itself” (ibid., p. 4). Feminism and narratology “joined forces” in the 1980s and Warhol and Lanser note that “criticism inspired

---

27 Jameson explains the crisis of representation as a rejection of “an essentially realistic epistemology” which subscribes to the traditional idea of objectivity (as external/detached) and “projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself” (Jameson in Mumby 1993, p. 2).

28 Mumby explains that “Lyotard argues that science does not simply consist of a neutral body of knowledge claims about the world but rather ‘produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status’” (1993, p. 3), i.e. a metanarrative. According to Oxford Reference (c. 2018), grand narratives are “Lyotard's term for the totalizing narratives or metadiscourses of modernity which have provided ideologies with a legitimating philosophy of history. […] Lyotard argues that such authoritarian universalizing narratives are no longer viable in postmodernity, which heralds the emergence of ‘little narratives’ (or micronarratives, petits récits) […]. Critics suggest that this could be seen as just another grand narrative, and some have seen it as Eurocentric.”
by theories of gender and sexuality continues to bring to light aspects of narrative that other narratologies […] tend to overlook or underemphasize.” Early on, the focus was on androcentric models, approaches and epistemologies (ibid., p. 2, p. 4), and Lanser goes so far as to say that “feminist narratology was effectively born essentialist” (2015, p. 25). In other words, feminist narratology was perpetuating some universalising tendencies while questioning others, in its early incarnations. Warhol and Lanser note that “[s]tructuralism, with its differently totalizing goals and its formalist abstractions, seemed among the theoretical approaches least likely to be influenced by the historicizing turn that feminist criticism was pioneering”, but then proceed to list feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter, cultural theorist Mieke Bal, and feminist scholar Nancy K. Miller as three theorists who helped challenge the hold structuralism had (2015, p. 4). Looking further into the 1980s, they bring up a number of influential theorists (e.g. Teresa DeLauretis; Margaret Homans; Mária Minich Brewer; Rachel Blau DuPleiss) and also arrive at their own early publications in feminist narrative theory in 1986, “both of which spoke from within the sphere of classical narratology to call for a gender-conscious poetics.” By the end of the 1990s, they conclude, “the tide had turned” for feminist narrative theory (ibid., p. 5), and that unlikely influence was a fact. This broadening into feminist narratologies eventually brought intersectional approaches to narrative analysis. According to Warhol and Lanser, intersectionality in feminist narrative analysis “tries to track the influence of as many categories as possible and to scrutinize the imbrications of those tracks when working out an argument, while remembering that the identity categories themselves are fluid within groups and even within individual persons” (ibid., p. 6). In other words, a focus that extended beyond generalised conceptions of gender and bodies, and the understanding that experiences and identities are varied both between and within different categories.29

Even though feminist narrative theory pre-dated the emergence of queer narrative theory, Warhol and Lanser conclude that neither one “could exist in its current form without the other” and declare them “difficult to tease apart”, yet in “fruitful tension” (ibid., p. 3).30 Butler’s theorising on performativity was, according to Warhol and Lanser, what “aligned” feminist and queer understandings of narrative theory (ibid., p. 6). I will allow Warhol and Lanser some space to further clarify this alignment:

29 Notably, however, Lanser finds that there is still much work to do in terms of expanding the canon of works that feminist and queer narratologists focus on, which is chiefly made up of the writings of “white, nineteenth- and twentieth-century English and American women and queer men” (2015, p. 25).

30 This “tension” could be taken to relate to how both fields of theory can sometimes employ a partial focus (such as feminism being too hetero- and cis-centric, or queer theory being to white- and masculine-centric), and challenges between them are important to their development.
narratives are critical to constructing, maintaining, exposing and dismantling the social systems, cultural practices, and individual lives that are shaped by performative acts. Feminist and queer narrative theorists identify and demystify the workings of those norms in and through narratives, and expose the dominant stories keeping the binaries in place (ibid., p. 7)

Feminist and queer theorists have been engaged in examining disruptions of the standard and normative narratives from different parts of the margins that feminists and queers of all varieties have always disrupted just by existing. As for queer theory, narrative has been central to it from the very start. “The centrality of narrative in shaping heteronormativity and with it queer subjectivity” has been widely acknowledged among queer theorists and theorists of sexuality (e.g. philosopher Roland Barthes, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Butler, Edelman). Queer narrative theory has focused on “whether and how narrative might be turned to queer ends”, but also on how narrative itself may be “heterocentric” (ibid., p. 8). Here, heteronormativity is that totalising grand narrative against which, or in alignment with which, the micronarratives of queer subjectivity are formed. Understanding heteronormativity as a hegemonic cultural narrative opens up for the possibility of subverting it, alternatively rejecting it, or, indeed, narrative on the whole. Once more, temporality comes in as an important focus area, specifically in connection with heteronormativity and futurity. I have already brought up Muñoz, who in the previous chapter declares his understanding of utopian and queer temporality as anti-antirelational and hopeful (2009), arguing against and along Edelman, another queer theorist engaging with queer temporality. Edelman, in his work No Future, declares futurity heteronormative in its focus on reproduction, and finds queerness both as positioned against this normative reproductive futurity, and as existing in the now which rejects and is rejected by that futurity (2004). Another queer theorist who writes on temporality and narrative is Halberstam, who in their book In a Queer Time and Place argues that queer time “is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.” Halberstam focuses on subcultures as the sites of potential alternative temporalities that make it possible for “their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside those paradigmatic markers of life experience” (2005, p. 2). Muñoz finds Edelman antirelational and calls himself anti-antirelational. Halberstam, in turn, takes their own relational stance in suggesting subculture as alternative community. It is, in other words, clear that queer theory and narrative are entangled with both temporality and relationality and offer multiple views on the matter. While I, just as Muñoz does, find many relevant aspects in Edelman’s stance, especially relating it to annihilation/death-drive, I also find that – for me, in my context
– it is not good enough to let go of the relational or temporal responsibility for queers other than myself, and other than here and now. For that reason, I do align myself more with Halberstam’s alternative temporalities, and in particular with Muñoz’s connecting of the anti-antirelational and queer horizons. While that means not wholly rejecting ideas of futurity, it still means rejecting heteronormative temporal logic, and allowing hope for different horizons.

While feminist and queer interventions (as well as other postmodern and poststructuralist theories) have successfully challenged the universalising, fixed, and rigid underpinnings of classical narratology, the focus of the methodology remains on form and structures – as contextualised, changeable, and entangled. As I analyse the three versions of The Handmaid’s Tale that are my primary source texts, I will focus on form as content (e.g. narrative structures, characterisations, representations), on narrative temporality (e.g. temporal structure, timelines), on sameness (e.g. repeated events and their changed contexts, characterisations, relational connections), on difference (e.g. removed/added events, contextualised character motivations, characterisations, relational connections) and on representations of utopia and dystopia through instances of violence and resistance. My analysis will be informed by an understanding of queer and feminist narratology as presented here, and, additionally, below, I offer a deeper explanation of my intended use of an explorative approach as well as the ways in which I will engage with situated knowledges, diffraction as a method of reading, and the concept of entanglement.

Potential, Existential Enactment, Construction – The explorative approach

Using Hernadi’s “hermeneutic triad” from 1987, Czarniawska lists three ways of narratologically analysing a text: through explication (reproductive translation, reconstruction), explanation (inferential detection, deconstruction), and exploration (existential enactment, construction). She notes that these three methods of analysis are “intertwined and simultaneous” and also goes on to discuss different ways of using and combining them (2004, p. 60). While I will be engaging with all three methods, I will focus more specifically on the explorative approach. Exploration, Czarniawska explains, means that the reader “stands in” for the author, “becomes” the author. She turns to feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto from 1991 as an example of the explorative approach. Based on her reading of it, she concludes that “[i]n this sense, all feminist writings are a huge exploration experiment” which she connects to the presence of the author/researcher in the writing and the challenges put to traditional knowledge production (ibid., p. 72). Czarniawska adds that the “quintessence of exploration”
is “to throw one’s identity into a text or to construct one’s identity through a text” (ibid.). In this thesis, I hope to do both. In order to engage with my research questions, I will actively challenge the material, entangle myself with it, and the three versions with one another. I find Czarniawska’s definition of the explorative approach a useful tool for imagining utopian hope and queer horizons. More such tools will hopefully become discernible as I engage with situated knowledges, entanglement, and diffraction below.

**Haraway: Situated Knowledges**

I intend to use Haraway’s situated knowledges (1988) as a foundation specifically for my explorative approach, but also as an underlying approach to research and thesis writing in general. I have already begun to do so, for instance through the subsection “Situating myself” in the first chapter (page 14), which is also part of the basis for my use of the explorative method. In short, this is a way to step away from the invisible researcher and into a detailed position of accountability.

Haraway’s concept of *situated knowledge* follows on postmodern ideas challenging objectivity, and on poet and feminist theorist Adrienne Rich’s notion of a *politics of location* (1986). Feminist scholar Nina Lykke comments that both Rich’s and Haraway’s concepts “are clearly consonant with Lyotard’s suggestion that postmodern knowledge production […] should be based on a bricolage of many small heterogeneous stories rather than one, grand, coherent master narrative” (Lykke 2010, p. 133), and in so doing shows both the concepts’ genealogy and their methodological impact. Explaining the need for this notion of situated knowledge, Haraway writes that:

> objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and all responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. […] Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see (1988, pp. 582-583)

She thus states her understanding of partial perspective/limited location/situated knowledge as the basis for what she calls a *feminist objectivity*. One that is neither “neutral” nor claims “omniscience”, but, rather, is located and locatable, and therefore able to be accountable for its claims. Haraway specifically stresses embodiment as a counterweight to the invisible, and thereby disembodied, researcher in traditional science epistemology. This embodiment is not only necessarily located *somewhere*, but is also materially *something*, which means it is a
presence of matter in any research it undertakes and therefore unavoidably affects it. As Haraway’s thinking on this issue has far wider implications for science epistemologies and politics than there is room to discuss here, suffice it to say that her method is instrumental to my thesis process. Making the choice, as I have, to employ an explorative approach, and to interfere with and demand things of my source texts, makes situated knowledge imperative to my academic ambitions for the end result.

Barad: Entanglement

As previously stated, my intention in this thesis is to explore the primary source texts as an entangled whole, looking at the way they are connected and how they impact one another, how they relate to “reality”, and how their contexts seep into and out of the texts. The notion of “entanglement”31 is one I borrow from theoretical physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad, who, to a great extent, builds it on her study of the work of physicist and quantum theorist Niels Bohr (Barad 2007; 2010). The fact that Barad builds her theory on physics is significant not only because she advocates for a more entangled approach to different disciplines, but also because of how this way of working engages with matter. Materiality is central to her thinking – not only as metaphor, but as part of how entanglement works.

Barad focuses on two different ways in which quantum physics demonstrate entanglement in the universe; one is the quantum leap32 and the other is the two-slit apparatus experiment.33 Both show the way that matter defies temporal linearity and the idea of fixed events and prove material fluidity over the boundaries of time and space. They also show entanglement as the becoming of phenomena34 in intra-actions35, which, for example (but not only), relates to research in how the study of something/someone is impacted by the researcher or apparatus used for the study – there is no “clean”, detached research process, only a co-constructive

31 Barad uses the term both in plural and singular form, as will I (e.g. Barad 2007).
32 Very briefly, in my own layperson terms, when a particle jumps it gives off light in a way which relates to where it ends up, despite the fact it does not know where it is going. It also goes from one location to another, without being anywhere in between (Barad 2010; pp. 246-247). Barad comments: “Quantum leaps are not simply strange because a particle moves discontinuously from one place here now to another place there then, but the fundamental notions of trajectory, movement, space, time, and causality are called into question” (Barad in Juelskjaer and Schwennesen 2012, p. 19).
33 Again, briefly, and in my words: The experiments with the two-slit apparatus has shown that you can determine if an entity is a particle or a wave by the pattern it makes if you fire it at a screen through a barrier with two slits. Further it has shown that the presence of measuring equipment affects the outcome/behaviour. Then it has been discovered that the behaviour would change after the fact if the recorded result was erased. Barad uses this to challenge conventional ideas of temporality and spatiality and show the entanglements of the universe (Barad 2010; Thompson 2016).
34 Barad explains that there are no “independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties”, only phenomena, which “do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of ‘observer’ and ‘observed’” but manifest “the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’” (2003, p. 815).
35 Barad explains that “the notion of intra-action recognises that distinct entities, agencies, events do not precede, but rather emerge from/through their intra-action” and that “agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements”. Further, she emphasises that “intra-action constitutes a radical reworking of the traditional notion of causality” (2010, p. 267).
becoming where the researcher, the researched, methods, and ideas form through their intra-action in that situation. The parts are inseparable from one another and the situation; entangled. Barad explains further:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (2007, p. ix)

The temporal aspect of entanglement is also significant (as it is in speculative fiction, utopian theory, and narratology) and Barad’s writing on quantum physics and her theory of entanglement shows that while there is no going back in time in the sense of an erasure of the past, the past is still not fixed, but changeable after the fact even in a material sense. This upsets a normative view, and narrative, of temporality, destabilising its fixity and one-directional momentum. (Barad sees it as a queering of time, a destabilising of binaries.) She explains that:

time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future (ibid.)

In other words, entanglements happen in every direction, and at every moment. Barad also stresses that the emergence she speaks of is not complete or final, but always ongoing (ibid.). The concept of entanglement thus lends itself well to my research, as I propose to analyse the three source texts as a whole in which the different parts form meaning together and through one another. As another tool for doing this, I will use Haraway’s and Barad’s concept of diffraction, discussed below.

**Haraway and Barad: Diffraction**

Barad explains her “‘diffractive’ methodological approach” as “reading insights” from various areas of focus “through one another” (2007, p. 25). The way Barad herself uses diffraction connects deeply to her understanding of intra-action and entanglement (see above). For example, she reads a historical event with unknown content through Derrida, Shakespeare, quantum physics experiments, World War II, a contemporary play, and her own imagined scenarios populated with scientists out of history (Barad 2010). Breaking with many scholarly conventions, she lets these different sources, imaginaries, associative impulses, and “timespace coordinates” become new ways of exploring her research questions.
Once more, Barad’s theorising is based on a concept of physics, connecting it to matter. The idea of diffraction can be materialised, diffractive wave-patterns can be studied when waves meet obstacles or overlap, Barad even argues that “we can understand diffraction patterns – as patterns of difference that make a difference – to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (2007, p. 72). Central to the diffractive method is a wish to turn away from an idea of reflecting as a sort of “neutral” mirroring or sameness, towards something that acknowledges that sameness is illusory, and this thought was introduced by Haraway (1992), whom Barad builds on (2007, p. 29). “Diffraction attends to patterns of difference” (ibid.) and a crucial point for Haraway – which Barad, in turn, emphasises – is the ability of a diffractive reading to engage with “the relational nature of difference” (ibid., p. 74), looking at the effects of it rather than its location. This is connected to Barad’s understanding of entanglement, as difference being co-constructed by phenomena in intra-action; multiple waves interfering/overlapping, diffractive patterns (the effects of difference) the result of their co-constructive becoming. In this thesis, it means studying the source texts as impacting/impacted by one another (creating patterns of difference), entangled with me as the explorative reader/viewer/writer/researcher/observer, emerging through intra-actions with their respective contexts, one another’s contexts, and the contexts of this thesis.

The next chapter will contain my analyses of the source texts, where I will put my methodological tools to use. This means engaging with my understanding of queer and feminist narratology (examining form as content, narrative temporality, sameness, and difference) and of disidentification, in search of utopian hope and queer horizons in the three texts. It means employing diffractive reading, an entangled understanding of the texts, and an explorative approach (entangling myself with the material). My analysis will be based around thematic observations through the lenses where I find utopia/dystopia to be represented in The Handmaid’s Tales, which I have touched on previously; temporality, relationality, violence, and resistance.

Chapter 4: Analysis
I Wish This Story Were Different/All of This Is a Reconstruction – Introduction
While there are many similarities between the three versions of The Handmaid’s Tale I will be analysing in this chapter, there are also significant differences. These similarities and

---

36 Both Barad (2007) and Geerts and van der Tuin (2016) note that Haraway builds on literary theorist Trinh Minh-ha’s thinking, though Minh-ha did not use the term “diffraction”.
differences expand each of the texts, and the story as a whole, through adding and altering information and events, through character developments, through taking new chances to portray the story. With my diffractive methodological approach, I will be studying these patterns of difference and the ways in which the texts overlap, impact one another, and form an entangled whole. The film is an adaption of the novel, and the TV series is an adaption of both, and, as three different texts, one of their entanglements is the exchange of information. The novel informs the other two texts through the main story (Offred’s story). The film changes the ways of telling (timeline and narration) and the plot is rearranged. It also adds events and actions. The TV series is informed by both the novel and the film, joining their information together, and expanding on it (thus informing the film and the novel, in turn). It also changes the characters, their motivations, and relationships, and, in my way of reading all three texts, I see the TV series as a sort of restoration of the story through disidentification. It is a new chance for Offred to take on Gilead, and she seems to have changed from her first two experiences (she is partially aligned with Offred and Kate, she restores their narrative through performance).

Some critics found *The Handmaid’s Tale* lacking in credibility when it was published (e.g. Gray 1986; Banerjee 1990). Somehow, despite it being a speculative fiction set in a dystopian future, and despite Atwood remaining consistently clear on the fact that she put nothing in the story that hadn’t already happened (Atwood 1985, p. xiv; Bouson 2010, p. 5; Jadwin 2010, pp. 21-22, p. 25), they found her to have strayed too far from the plausible. The novel was published in the midst of a Christian right-wing backlash against feminist advances (Bouson 1993, p. 135; Neuman 2006; Jadwin 2010, p. 28), but the dismissive critics seem to have had faith in a linear, progressive, and liberal timeline for the U.S., where going backwards just did not appear possible. Now, here we are, over three decades later, and things are quite different. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Gilead is formed through a *coup d’état*, but today, that hardly seems necessary, when the current U.S. administration is driving a clearly cisheterosexual, racist, classist, misogynist, trans- and queerphobic agenda. At the same time, Brazil attempts to curtail reproductive rights further, Bermuda repeals the right for same-sex couples to marry, white men continue to terrorise their surroundings through mass-shootings, arson, rape, and deadly force, and fascists show up in thousands to promote extreme right-wing views and white supremacy all over Europe and the U.S., just to name a few of the political crises, for people of colour, people with uteruses, queers, people without legal status, and other marginalised

---

37 E.g. Rafferty, Sotomayor & Arkin 2017; Levin 2018; Ring 2018; Holodny 2017; Cole 2018.
groups, that are ongoing and escalating in this decade. No wonder, then, that the story was picked up again. Offred’s life may have seemed far-fetched in 1985 but June’s life seems painfully possible in 2017. Even for a white, middle-class woman in the U.S. (such as myself, or Elisabeth Moss, or June). All of the above is why I have chosen to look at these three texts and utopia/dystopia. Because this dystopia seems too real, and because I need utopia to counteract it – an open-ended, imperfect, changing utopia with room for those of us who want solidarity, empathy, equality. This is how I am entangled in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and invested in what it does and doesn’t do, what it can do, what it could do (to itself; to me; to you).

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian story entangled in utopias. The Gileadean regime is structured around a utopia of fundamentalism and totalitarianism, a classic, blueprint utopia which is hierarchical, restrictive and prescriptive and envisions one type of better place for one type of people. One of the foundations of it is that women need to be kept out of everything except the home; people classified as women are not allowed to read, participate in politics or legislation, not allowed outside certain areas, not allowed to drive. It is a utopia of Christian, middle-class men, who no longer want to cater to the needs of people other than themselves. Entitled, exclusionary, oppressive. This “utopia” is incomprehensible to me, but at the same time all too plausible and real. It becomes the dystopia of anyone who does not fit into the privileged group, which is to say a majority of people. There are definitely degrees of the dystopian; the Wives, for example, enjoy many privileges, but are still banished to their homes with nothing to do but gardening, knitting, and waiting for someone else to have a baby for them. The other classes of women – Aunts (Handmaid-handlers, teachers, and enforcers), Econowives (lower class Wives and Marthas rolled into one), Marthas (maids and cooks), Handmaids (forced surrogates) – are hierarchically inferior to the Wives and have things to do, but no freedom of choice. Handmaids are the least free in Gilead and deepest set in the dystopian totality but are still better off than those who are sent to the colonies to clear up nuclear waste (p. 248; 0h07; E01, E08) which is a slow but certain death sentence. In this dystopia, utopia is also sometimes shown in the flashbacks to pre-Gileadean times where there are scenes of love, freedom, and family interaction. But this utopia is the disappointed hope, the let-down wish-fulfilment, which upon closer inspection shows all its flaws and its complicity in creating the conditions for the current dystopia. (*Why did we not stop it from happening?*) There is also the future utopia, the horizon, the hope. This is passive for some (in the belief that Gilead cannot be allowed to go on, but not taking any action to end it), and active for some (ranging from
personal insolence to organised resistance). Utopia as potential/possibility/hope drives those acts of resistance.

I encourage the reader who is not familiar with the characters, or one or more versions of the texts, to read both parts of the Appendix (brief summary page 85 and list of characters page 88) ahead of reading the rest of this chapter. Referencing the source texts, I will indicate page numbers (e.g. p. 83) for the novel, hour and minute (e.g. 1h08) for the film, and episode (e.g. E04) for the TV series. The core characters are the same in all three texts. If I need to distinguish between the versions of a character with the same name, I will indicate the medium. For the main protagonist, I will use Offred to signify the novel, Kate for the film, and June for the TV series. (And for their daughter, the child, Jill, or Hannah, respectively.) The below sections are divided according to themes (temporality, relationality, violence, resistance) to give this chapter some structure, but these themes are all entangled and inseparable, and will be present throughout the analysis.

**Once Upon a Time in the Future – Temporality**

**Narrative temporal structure**

The three versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale* all have varying temporal structures and approaches to temporality. The novel has multiple timelines, ranging over around two hundred years; Offred’s “now” and recent past in Gilead; the Red Centre (about three years before the “now”); Gilead being established, up to and including the escape attempt; Offred meeting her husband and having a child; Moira and Offred in college; Offred’s childhood; the new “now” of the Historical Notes (i.e. the year 2195). The novel goes back and forth between all of Offred’s time coordinates throughout the chapters, while 2195 is only part of the Historical Notes, with no previous indication that this is the pseudo-documentary framing of the story. The Historical Notes add yet another layer of time, and that is the time of recording, which necessarily takes place between the “now” of Offred’s story, and the “now” of 2195. This can be read differently whether one treats Offred’s story as her thoughts, her voice on the tapes, or as a transcript of her recordings. For me, the words remain with Offred, out of the hands of the historians; something between me and her. This is because I trust her, but I don’t trust them – they would not be relaying her experiences faithfully; their interpretations add distorting lenses and airs of “objective” knowledge. Even though Offred, as a character, is not reliable in the sense of being consistent and fully forthcoming with information, this lack of reliability is reliable. The narrative voice paints an unflattering and inconsistent picture, a multiplicity of emotional states,
through a singular perspective – the narrator’s information is partial but situated. I find the Historical Notes limiting because they fit a more rigid and closure-oriented frame on the story, after the fact. To me, Offred’s irreverent take on truthful representation, and her fluidity in remembering, make more room for unfixedness and hope.

The TV series has the same set-up as the novel in most ways, although there is no Historical Notes-future represented in the events of it. However, much of the information from the Historical Notes is used to fill out the story in its different pasts and presents, so in that sense, it is still incorporated into the story. The TV series excludes June’s childhood, and her mother, entirely. More time is given to June’s and Moira’s friendship, and to June’s relationship with Luke and them having and raising Hannah. The TV series also avoids the sort of immediate flashbacks that Offred has (to events maybe weeks/days/hours before the “now”) and instead shows the “now” in a more linear fashion. Unlike the novel, where the main segment is entirely from Offred’s perspective as first-person narrator, the TV series represents experiences of other characters besides June, and events where she is not present (e.g. E06, E07, E08). She remains the only character that narrates, however, so those segments are without voice-over. The timelines in the TV series are June’s “now” at her placement; her capture and time at the Red Centre; the time before Gilead, including the escape attempt (three years earlier); Luke and June meeting, having Hannah (over five or more years); Moira’s and June’s friendship from college and up to “now”; Luke after the escape attempt three years earlier; Luke “now” in Canada; Serena Joy’s and the Commander’s life before the coup and in early Gilead, and with their previous Handmaid around the time of her (recent) death; Nick’s time before and in early Gilead. The jumps between different times have different visual characteristics, where there is close, partial focus and brief frames/frequent cuts for June’s happy memories of love and intimacy (often transitioned through backlit images/direct sunlight and so on), but a clearer and more direct focus and high-paced, fractured editing for flashbacks containing key events, risk, violence, and the like. Gilead “now” for Offred is saturated and still, anchoring the static, repetitive, and restrictive daily life through the visuals.

The film has neither a disassembled timeline, nor a first-person narrator (except for at the very end). Instead it starts at Kate’s escape attempt with Jill and Luke, and weaves Gilead into the story of Kate’s continuous now. She is processed and sent to the Red Centre, her posting with Serena Joy and the Commander is her first, the events there happen chronologically, and after she is taken away by Nick and Mayday, she hides in the mountains through her pregnancy,
waiting to be reunited with him. In the film, the story is changed to fit a chronological timeline to the extent that Kate is even sent back to the Red Centre while the Commander is out of town so that more events can take place there chronologically rather than through flashbacks, as in the other texts. There are a few very brief flashbacks, all of them to the same moment, where Luke is killed, and Kate is captured – either the image of Luke’s dead body, or that of Jill walking in the snow and calling for her mother. These are like flash memories that overcome Kate on occasion. This conventional temporality somehow takes away from the chaos of the story. The structure of it is logical, and much of the confusion that comes with Offred’s and June’s temporal fragments being pieced together over the course of the novel and the TV series is gone. In the film, this confusion is placed in Kate as a character rather than in the structuring of events, and manifests in insolence, irrationality, and emotionality. Gilead is logically understandable, but she doesn’t understand her situation well enough to adapt, subvert, or outsmart. Offred, on the other hand, understands her situation, but to her Gilead is not a logical structure. It is a loosely gathered collection of story fragments she slowly puts together in order not to fall apart, following other logics than the temporal (relational, for example). When it comes to June, she has already been through the novel and the film, and she has pulled herself together. She understands Gilead on a moment-to-moment basis (suspended in readiness for the next unimaginable detail) because she has to survive, but she rejects its logic and dips into the past for herself; to remember her own logic.

In short, there are examples of both normative narrative temporal structures (as in the film), and more fluid/less linear approaches to narrative temporal order, as in the novel and TV series. In both the novel and TV series, many transitions between different times happen through association – words or events. Offred and June float in and out of their past and present. Offred also floats in her now and into the future – speculating about Luke, for example, or retelling the same event differently. The first-person narration initiates or aides these transitions, and, in the TV series, there are other visual indications as well, as mentioned above (e.g. light; focus; editing). The TV series does employ a traditional format, there is a clear now and the flashbacks are conventionally framed, but it does preserve more of the confusion of the novel; limited scope, gradual revelations, associative (thus non-linear) events, almost like emotional timelines. The novel remains the most temporally fragmented representation, and also the text with least character-specific closure. With the Historical Notes there is a larger scale closure (Gilead does

---

39 E.g. bath-time in Gilead/bath-time with the child/Hannah, p. 63, E01; claiming the room/hotel rooms with Luke, p. 50; passing by shop/ice-cream with daughter p. 165; Locked up in the now/escaping in the past, E04; Courtship with Luke/"Ceremony" with Nick, E05.
end) but Offred’s personal fate remains unknown after she steps into the van. The film, in contrast, is the text that provides most closure. Its plot is neatly packaged, with initial explanations, and a narrated ending segment that places Kate safely in the mountains well into her pregnancy, fed by the resistance, and awaiting her reunion with Nick who is out fighting the good fight (1h44). The film even crops the main protagonist’s backstory down to almost nothing – no previous friendship with Moira, barely a word spoken between Kate and Luke, hardly any family or life history – containing all of Kate’s timeline within the plot. Even with the open ends (i.e. unborn child, Nick still away, Gilead still there) the safe and tempered end-segment provides an abundance of both explicit and implicit closure compared to the novel.

While the TV series is much less linear and limited than the film, it displays a higher level of conventional temporal logic than the novel. That is to say, one that enables many kinds of viewers to remain engaged in the story and understand it easily enough, and, a season finale that gives satisfactory closure to the foremost storylines (i.e. will June get pregnant, will she be free of the Commander, will Serena Joy find out about them, will Moira make it out of Gilead, is Luke alive, will Nick help her?) but leaves the larger ones (i.e. will June get Hannah back, will June be reunited with Luke and Moira, will June make it out of Gilead, will Gilead end?) open for another season.

The format does more than dictate the acceptable (marketable) level of temporal logic within the three source texts, it also dictates the (marketable) material temporal conditions of the texts themselves. A novel can take up a very wide range of pages and still remain within publishing conventions. A film follows different length-conventions in different times, and in 1990 The Handmaid’s Tale was released at 1 hour and 48 minutes. The TV series S01 is comprised of ten episodes ranging from 46 to 60 minutes in length at a total of 6 hours and 40 minutes. These material limitations are bound to impact the possibility of challenging intra-diegetic temporal conventions as well, as they regulate the number of events and plot points that fit in a text and the text-time available to obscure or clarify, provide palatable open ends or closure, include back- and side-stories, or cut them short. However, while the TV series has the largest material time-frame (if one equates one minute of programming with one page of screenplay) the novel is still the form which allows for most fragmentation, non-linearity, and unconventional temporal structures.
**Temporal context and entanglements**

The temporality of Gilead itself as a fictional location through the three source texts is a time-entanglement worth mentioning. In the novel (1985), Offred’s “now” is somewhere in the near future (1990s, perhaps early 2000s), so the general sense for the reader at the time would have been “near future”. Then all of that changes in the Historical Notes, where the actual “now” of the text is revealed to be in the 22nd century, and the reader turns out to be in the distant past of it all (but also, somehow, already in 2195). Furthermore, the novel re-inscribes the immediate past of the reader by tracing the origins of Gilead to changes in society (e.g. epidemic infertility, disastrous nuclear plant accidents, p. 112, spiralling rape, murder, and abduction rates, p. 226) which would then have emerged in the readers present to fit the timeline. It goes backwards and forward at the same time, creating an impossible temporality for itself in a different now, an alternative past, and the far future. This temporal dislocation is part of what loosens the perimeters of the story and keeps it impossible and plausible at once; it cannot be anchored anywhere, yet it has many identifiable anchor-points. The film (1990) remains less temporally expansive/experimental and declares itself set “once upon a time in the future” in the opening credits. Similar to the majority of the novel (i.e. excluding the Historical Notes as location), the film moves in a sort of borderland between the now of its creation and an imagined near future. It tells its story chronologically, as if it happened tomorrow or a few weeks from now, for the viewer. We know it is not “now” because it is not “like now”, but we also know it isn’t “a hundred years from now”, because it is too much “like now”. Both the novel and the film use technology to signal the futuristic component, with Compuphones, Compucards, televised newscasts and digital surveillance apparatuses. In the film, credit card-like substitutes for shopping tokens (0h32-34) and bar code identity bracelets (0h11) are added as other hyper-modern/futuristic items. Ironically, for the future reader or viewer these details make both the novel and film dated (e.g. stationary computers, old-timey thick screen TVs, Compuphones forty times the size of a smartphone). The style of Gilead and its inhabitants in the film is also temporally coded through the fashion and aesthetics of the late 1980s and early 1990s; shiny synthetic materials, glossy make-up and feathered hair, typical interior design. Of course, in time the TV series will be just as dated to audiences, not least the pre-Gileadean days, but here the choice has been to make Gilead old-fashioned instead. Plain, natural materials, old-fashioned modest clothing, no technology at all, the Handmaids are cattle branded with ear tags rather than given a barcode or chip, indeed, cars and weapons are about the only technological items at all. One of the core ideals of Gilead, which is also materially implemented in the TV series, is going “back” to “simpler” times – an imagined/constructed purity. In the series, the
time leading up to Gilead is very contemporary with its release (2017), it is effectively the “now” of the viewer (if the viewer is in a western capitalist society), complete with athleisure wear, elaborate to-go coffee, smartphones, digital banking, and dating apps. The contrast between “before Gilead” and “Gilead” is effective, and, blending in the pre-Gileadean with the Gileadean both in flashbacks and in what appears as anachronisms in the way the Handmaids – seemingly immersed in a sort of late 19th early 20th century servant class life – sometimes speak (“Oh man, I hate stonings.” E10; “Mrs Waterford wants to see you in her room.” “Awesome.” E06; “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches.” E04; “I used to get fucked behind a dumpster, just so I could buy a sixth of Oxy and a Happy Meal.” E05) jolts one’s sense of time as a viewer. This, combined with how the Commander and Serena Joy speak of Gilead and strategise about the marketing/packaging/showbiz of it all (e.g. E05, E06), underlines the way that their going backward in time for their ideal future is still infused with other ideas than those of that past.

Going back in time, either as a positive (i.e. going back to better times, reining in societal degeneration) or as a negative (i.e. going back to worse times, reversing progression and curtailing rights won), is impossible, as we cannot erase the now. That means going forward, to a new construction of society (Gilead) which may be based on ideas of the past but is always conceived through the now; i.e. not back to a time, for example, before women had civil rights, but through a time when women have had civil rights, through public discourse on oppression, power-structures, abuse, harm, and the expression of needs, to a point of violently suppressing those voices, rights, and needs again. In that sense, Gilead is an active choice to disregard the harmful consequences of such a societal structure, stripped of any possible excuses or motivations, other than we do not acknowledge the personhood of anyone but ourselves. This is the terror of Gileadean dystopia; undeniably, their eyes are open. And yet. The Commander even acknowledges this: “Better never means better for everybody, he says. It always means worse, for some” (p. 211; E05). Offred, Kate and June all handle this differently, and perhaps one of the most telling temporal anchor-points are the views and representations of feminism and gender. Offred is over her mother’s radical feminist porn magazine bonfires and essentialist separatism (p. 38, p. 119, p. 121), she misses hand lotion more than anything, women’s magazines as a secret gift make her fingers ache with longing (pp. 156-59), and as soon as she is in a relationship with Nick she has no interest in the revolution (pp. 270-71). Sure, she still has to put up with ceremonial rape, but, hey, the Commander is kinda sweet, so (e.g. p. 95, p. 163, pp. 187-88, p. 254). She just wants to survive (most of the time) and find her daughter so
she can make sure the child remembers who her real mother is (p. 228). Other than that, she’s not political. Kate, in turn, is locked away, robbed of her narrative voice, in a hazy-lens chintz nightmare envisioned by Mr. Pinter and Mr. Schlöndorff. She is resigned to childish emotional outbursts, tossing her big unruly hair about, and wasting sex-appeal on her oppressors.40 Where Offred and June are on lock-down through their rape Ceremonies, Kate writhes and cries (0h29-30). Where Offred and June are wary and cautious in their interactions with the Commander (albeit in different minds about him in general), Kate wordlessly dodges his advances, protests insolently (to his ill-concealed pleasure) (e.g. 0h38-40; 0h54-55; 1h11-13), and gasps with joy over sexy evening gowns and make-up (1h19). To this character, the horrors of Gilead are personal, and the remedy to it all, it appears, is flirting with Nick (e.g. 0h23-24). June emerges through Offred, through Kate as a reading of Offred, as a pattern of difference. Both Offred and Kate seem imagined from a point of view of the “what if” being absurd; we are beyond this point of inequality which makes this scenario absurd. And if the scenario is absurd, the resistance can be personal. Offred and Kate can afford to waste their time on romance, because Gilead is only an implausible nightmare fantasy. Their liberty is to have sexual agency even in a totalitarian state, refusing their roles as mere objects but not getting much farther than subject-objects (wanting, yes, but also revelling in attention and existing through validation). June could be their child; processed through them, she takes her subjecthood for granted. She doesn’t care about beauty magazines. Sure, she may have indulged before, but now? Their insignificance is complete (E05). Despite her privileged status (which meant she didn’t leave in time, she didn’t want to believe it could come to this) she knows Gilead has happened with people’s awareness of what it will mean in terms of death, oppression, destruction, and violence. She knows nobody is coming to save her. That nothing will be given to her for free, and nothing can be taken for granted, not even her status as a human with rights. Time is not a linear progressive, it is a power struggle/an entanglement; Gilead tries to change the meaning of the time before by removing any material traces of it, however, while this alters the outcome/the now, the past cannot be undone.41

Dystopian temporalities

Dystopia in The Handmaid’s Tale is a temporal suspension for the characters. This new regime, in which they are captured and forced into servitude, begins as an unfathomable

40 The poster/cover for the film shows Kate from the waist up, naked, holding her sheer red Handmaid’s veil in front of her breasts, unruly hair spread over her shoulders, looking down. “One woman’s story. Every woman’s fear.” reads the tagline (Internet Movie Database, n.d.).
41 This relates to Barad’s thinking on the two-slit experiment, and her emphasis on the material traces of moments, i.e. while the result can be changed after the fact, while the past “can be redeemed, productively reconfigured in an iterative unfolding of spacetimematter”, still, “its sedimenting effects, its trace, cannot be erased” (Barad in Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p. 67).
situation and remains impossible to them as it goes on, *yet it does go on*. It is an impossible infinity. While they all hold on to the thought that it must end because it is oppressive to them, they don’t know if it will, that it will, or when it will. It is ongoing. In the novel and the TV series, it has already gone on for years when we meet Offred and June (p. 15; E01). Offred/Kate/June all *know* (as in *hope*, because, the alternative is impossible to comprehend) that Gilead can’t go on forever, yet it is going on forever, and this temporal bind is a dystopian infinity; a suspension in the never-ending bad place. The oppression is fully known, i.e. in the here and now, i.e. fixed, and it stretches forever in every possible direction.

Dystopian temporality is also the fading out of alternate realities. In the novel, Offred comments on how the women of Gilead will eventually no longer remember the before (p. 117) and thus no longer know to reject the present. Aunt Lydia speaks about how things eventually come to seem normal (e.g. pp. 32-33, p. 117, p. 162). She means it as a reassurance; if it appears normal, it won’t seem so bad. In the TV series, as the Handmaids are used in preparation of a state visit to scrub blood from the wall where those executed by the regime usually hang on display, Janine comments that it looks strange without dead bodies there, concluding that it is possible to get used to all sorts of things (E06). All these examples underline the danger of time passing in dystopia. Gilead becomes normalised; with enough time no one will be left to challenge its truths. In this sense, time itself is an accomplice of the dystopian regime.

Dystopian temporality is just as much about the fading *in* of alternate realities. Gilead descends on the U.S. citizens gradually, and, in the end, when they can no longer get out, they marvel at how it happened. The dismantling of rights happens in increments, and even though the characters are tangibly right in the middle of the impossible – Offred/Kate/June are forced to leave their job, their assets are confiscated (e.g. pp. 175-176; E03) – they are still so attached to their old expectations of the world that they reject the possibility of what is already happening. It is as if they expect to be presented with a choice and have the option of declining and relocating comfortably. Moira moves quicker, she has fewer privileges to coat herself in and doesn’t wait by the window, appalled but incredulous, while Gilead rolls in from the distance. She prepares, she organises, she protests. She runs first (but still gets caught) (e.g. p. 180, pp. 241-245; E03). She doesn’t doubt the reality of Gilead; she knows queer human rights have always been precarious and conditional and has never taken them for granted. *Look out. Here it comes* (p. 174).
The above paragraphs have described dystopian temporality in the source texts as infinite and chaotic (impossible but ongoing), as the gradual erasure of alternatives, and, as the gradual implementation of itself in plain sight. Other aspects of the dystopian temporality are a mix of the finite and infinite at once through their crushing regularity and their function as measure/countdown. For instance, the menstrual cycle, the Ceremony, the doctor’s visits, the question of pregnancy, and, behind it all the biological clock of each person and the national population as a whole. Though there is an infinity in this recurrence and regularity, these are all finite temporalities in that time is always running out and each recurrence is a countdown; the more Ceremonies they go through with no result, the closer Offred/Kate/June is to being sent to the colonies to die. The doctor’s visits are similar manifestations of her useless ripeness and hopeless situation. Much of life in Gilead is based on these routines, repetitions, and recurrences. Daily shopping with a Handmaid twin, where the cloak and wings and name remain the same, but the body that meets you at the gate can be different overnight (which always means death or punishment of the previous body). These generational replacements of Offreds, Ofglens, Ofwarrens, Ofstevens also underline the interchangeability; the finite temporality of each person/story/body and the infinity of the Handmaid.

Temporally speaking, utopia from a Gileadean perspective (i.e., dystopia, to the protagonists) thus becomes controlled time, charted time, owned time. Also thwarted time; hijacking progressive temporality, bending it to a narrower definition, redefining futurity as a privilege awarded very few at the expense of many. Deciding who is allowed time, and future, and who is not. Timelines as power, and as currency.

**Utopian temporalities**

In a utopian sense, time passing can be seen as a manifestation of possibility, because it is a movement and movement opens up the possibility for change. In the previous chapters I have discussed the temporality of utopia and concluded that it is necessarily displaced in time. One of the temporal features that entangles dystopia and utopia is the Commander’s relationship to the past, in the present. He is one of the architects of Gilead and has had a great deal of impact on laws and regulations, yet he is unable to make do with the society he has helped create. This is expressed, among other things, through his attachment to pre-Gileadean society. He collects books and magazines and he has illicit affairs with his Handmaids doing illegal things with them (playing board-games, watching them read books, dressing them in old clothes and make-up – *an oasis of the forbidden* ) (e.g. p. 137, pp. 158-59, p. 219; 0h38-40, 0h54-55, 1h11-13;
E02, E08, E09, E10). This attachment to the past helps destabilise Gilead; it shows the present regime as hollow and impossible even for its true believers. In that sense there is a utopian element in this obsession with the no-longer which is a rejection of the here-and-now, thus opening up to a different not-yet.

The past also provides Offred and June with the stuff of their dreams and hopes, meaning utopian temporality in *The Handmaid’s Tales* in some ways seems displaced in the not-now/not-here more directly than in the not-yet. But, despite this tendency for them to look back, there is no way back. Gilead will always have happened, and they will always have had to be separated from Luke and the child/Hannah, held captive, abused, and raped. The child/Hannah won’t remember them. Their country will still have been the place to let Gilead happen. The hope of before is inevitably disappointed; to want to go back to the same is to want to go back to the conditions that allowed “now” to form. However, in the impossible suspension of time that is dystopia, even Offred, the most passive protagonist, still has some kind of hope for a better future; all three of them do. They act on it differently – Offred with detachment, Kate impulsively, June with cautious determination – but they all still believe in the possibility of a different future. This hope is not confident and all-encompassing, rather, it is intermittent, and, often desperate. Its opposite is the preoccupation with suicide; the possibility of suicide, the means for suicide, others’ suicides, burning the house down with everyone in it. In a way, this focus on suicide can also be understood as a hopeful timeline, because of the unknown result. While there is a very definite closure for the body, death can be understood as open-ended for the consciousness/person, since it is unclear what will happen. And, in an oppressive, violent dystopia, nothingness could very well seem like the best option. But the more conventional hope, or at least passivity, wins out, i.e. staying alive, surviving, getting through it. This is not only connected to Offred/Kate/June escaping their current “now”, but also to love/romance/relationality, which I will return to in the next subsection.

A significant hopeful/utopian temporal feature in the source texts is the different strategies to reach out through time. For Offred it is manifested both through her predecessor’s carving in the closet (p. 52), and through her own telling of the story. Both of these messages are composed and recorded for an unknown audience. This is significant; both Offreds send their words out into the future, unsure of whom (if anyone) it will reach. They reach out to someone, both for their own sake and for the sake of that person, whoever they are. The previous Offred knows the likelihood of someone taking her place in that same room after she kills herself, and she
gives that person a history, a kinship, and information about her own situation (e.g. p. 52; E04). Narrator Offred needs to tell the story so that it gets told, to keep herself sane, and to give it to someone to help them understand or know they are not alone (pp. 39-40). In the TV series, the themes from the novel are kept and added to: June, like Offred, tells her story to someone (“There is always someone else. Even when there is no one.”, p. 40; E08), and she forms a strong bond to her predecessor through the carving in the closet; it becomes her own motto, and the key to understanding her own situation (E04). Offred/June read themselves through their predecessor. The carving in the closet is also mirrored in the flashback to Moira carving a message into a toilet cubicle at the Red Centre. June is dismissive, but Moira persists, claiming it matters because it means the person who sees it will know they are not alone (E04). June takes it one step further, carving her own message into the closet wall before she is taken away: you are not alone (E08). Just as in the novel, this is a temporal relationality without fixed recipients, a kinship between unknown persons over time, something akin to Muñoz’s (2009) singular plurality. In the TV series, there are a few more instances of such messages, for example, June receives a pack of letters from Mayday, Handmaids in captivity all over Gilead, who tell their stories, and, importantly, their names (E09, E10). This shows June on the receiving end of such temporal relationality, and also the meaning it might have, as she entrusts them to Rita when she is being taken away (we don’t know for sure where Rita’s loyalties lie) (E10). The characters that practice these acts of writing/speaking to unknown future recipients do, in my interpretation, place the breadcrumbs of hope and utopia on the queer horizon, to be found just as Offred/Kate/June finds the carving in the closet.

**Relational temporalities**

I have already touched on relational temporalities, both in mentioning love/relationships, and in the above section on messages to unknown recipients. One of the central relational temporalities is the way Offred/June relate to Luke, and Offred/Kate relate to Nick. For Offred and June, whether Luke is dead or alive remains unknown (for Offred throughout the novel, for June until E06) but they still hold on to the relationship and the unknown as possibility several years into Gilead. This relational temporality leaves them entangled both with the past and the possibility and hope for a future. As long as they are not certain he is dead, their relationship exists in infinity. When June gets word that Luke is alive, it seems to give her hope and courage. Someone outside Gilead knows her, who she used to be. This re-connects her to herself – if there is an outside where people exist, it confirms the impossibility of Gilead, and that means there is hope. When it comes to Nick, Offred and Kate both place their hopes of a future in him,
as dependent on him. The fact that he is a person to whom they can attach themselves in an intimate heterosexual relationship seems more crucial than who he is as a person in that relationship. To them, the future is necessarily attached to a man; the possibility of this is what gives them purpose and strength to endure the “now”. He is the key to their hope.

All three of them also have a sort of infinite temporal hope connected to the child/Jill/Hannah – for Offred it is mainly connected to the child’s ability to remember her and love her, whereas for Kate and June it is also connected to the ability to save Jill/Hannah and get her out of Gilead (e.g. p. 39, p. 64; 1h03-06; E01, E10). The infinity of hope/love is also connected to the infinity of Gilead when it comes to the child/Jill/Hannah, who is, significantly, the daughter of a fertile woman, and therefore likely faces a similar future to that of her mother. These relational temporalities stretch in multiple directions at once, especially for Offred and June through their memories and flashbacks to the things that were, through uncertainty regarding the child/Jill/Hannah’s whereabouts, and through the expectations on their future in Gilead. Offred most strongly represents the heteronormative temporal narrative in her fear of being lost if her offspring forgets her, as if she can only exist in the biological continuum of her genes, but for all of them, the fear and other emotions connected to the child/Jill/Hannah are proprietary and individualised, in the sense that they do not express a general fear for the future of the children, or the willingness to sacrifice their own bond with their specific child to bring Gilead down. The child/Jill/Hannah is their motivation to stay/stay alive. In this sense, they are in some ways tied down by a biological temporality (i.e. their offspring as extension of the self).

**There is an us, then – Relationality**

**Relational structures**

The relational structures of the story differ somewhat between the texts. On the surface, Gilead is about the solitary. Except for sanctioned or arranged marriages, it is each character for themselves. Even when there are networks of them, such as the Commanders who rule or the Wives who socialise, competition or fear undermine any genuine connections. As for the Handmaids, they are cut off from any past connections, and kept separate in the present. Offred and June, however, because of their narrative voice, can build invisible relational structures to the past and the future, the reader/viewer, and the people around them. Kate, who has not been given the narrative voice, can only form explicit bonds, and they are necessarily fewer and in the now. The relational is one of the most strictly controlled aspects of the characters’ life in Gilead. The forging of relational bonds is forbidden for Handmaids and an informant culture is
fostered, so that the basic state of interaction between characters is one of suspicion, and mistrust (e.g. p. 71; E01). At the Red Centre, the Aunts have the Handmaids under surveillance at all times and keep them compliant through violence/threats of violence (e.g. pp. 3-4, p. 91; 0h09-12; E01, E04, E10). They learn how to speak soundlessly between their beds and meet surreptitiously in the restrooms. When they are posted, their individual names are outlawed, and they are never allowed to be alone outside of their houses, or with anyone in their rooms. Their white wings are created in a manner that shields them from seeing or hearing very well, which makes illicit conversation difficult. Intelligence officers are everywhere, and those who break the rules are tortured and hanged publicly, underlining the danger of forming any type of alliances. The different classes of people in servitude are also pitted against one another, fostering animosity between Marthas and Handmaids and between Econowives and everyone else (e.g. p. 10, p. 44). There is a strict hierarchy at all times, which does vary in different situations (for instance the Marthas consider themselves morally superior, but when a Handmaid is pregnant that radically changes her rank in the hierarchy). Other than these hierarchical structures, relationships in Gilead are reciprocal (friendship, solidarity, sex, romance) and non-reciprocal (relationships of control, servitude), permissible (marriages, business between men, camaraderie between military personnel, friendship between Wives, or Marthas) and non-permissible (queer relationships, friendship between Handmaids, any kind of relationship between Handmaids and others, parental bonding between Handmaids and children). The non-permissible ones are punished if they are found out, and a death sentence is likely, yet, these relationships are had, defiantly/out of necessity (despite the risks). There is also relationality with unknown nodes/ recipients, as shown in the section about the carvings and letters, above. All in all, the relational is highly prioritised in the texts.

**Relational temporality**

I have touched on relational temporalities in other places, in conjunction with, for example, Luke, the child/Jill/Hannah, and previous Offred. Here, I would like to bring up another aspect, which informs the characters in the film and TV series (and by extension, potentially the novel, as well). As viewers, we don’t watch these texts in a vacuum, and the portrayals in them bring residue of our previous knowledge of the actors that embody the characters. For example, to me, Elisabeth Moss (i.e. Elisabeth Moss the public figure/ assemblage of characters) brought a certain kind of expectations and credibility to June through what I had seen her in previously. She represents feminist and headstrong Peggy Olsen in *Mad Men* (2007-2015), who takes on a male-dominated business in the 1950s and 1960s, and, detective Robin Griffin in *Top of the
Lake (2013-2017), who persists through patriarchal and sexist scare-tactics to get to the truth. When I see her in the red dress and white wings, I know she is not about to go quietly, or be easily broken down. Samira Wiley, who plays Moira, is married to a woman, and played queer Poussey on Orange is the New Black (2103-), used to being misread, used to being rejected for who she was, used to a hostile environment. To me, a queer, it matters that she knows queerness, that her being adamant about the bathroom carving might be because she actually knows about the need for unknown queer relational nodes out there in the world. Even Alexis Bledel, of goody-two-shoes Gilmore Girls (2000-2007) fame, reassures me. Rory Gilmore managed her own and her mother’s life from a very young age, so I know that Ofglen keeps her shit together and is suitable for a role in the resistance. And, frankly, I’m so proud that she grew up to be a lesbian political dissident. My latest encounter with Ann Dowd, Aunt Lydia, was as a sadistic cult leader in The Leftovers (2014-2017) so I don’t fall for her fake benevolence for a second. I know she isn’t one to pull her punches. Ralph Fiennes brings in a buffet of military men, religious types, and historical noblemen that perfectly underpin the Commander’s outdated zeal. In the film, Robert Duvall, ambitious consigliere in The Godfather (1972) and unconventionally sadistic lieutenant colonel (who loves the smell of napalm in the morning) in Apocalypse Now (1979), similarly bestows despotic gravitas on the Commander. He is strategic, devious, and completely lacks empathy. As for Serena Joy, Faye Dunaway brings loose cannon gangster Bonnie (Bonnie and Clyde, 1967) and volatile survivor Evelyn Mulwray (Chinatown, 1974) into the Commander’s residence, draped in shiny blue dresses and banished to inactivity. The pressure is tangible. Knitting needles and garden shears are full of withheld violence in her hands. Undoubtedly, these impressions are very personal, but I bring them up here to show how the characters in the source texts are entangled with previous characters that the actors have portrayed. (Generally, of course, this is deliberate in casting choices.) I choose to address it because I find it to be a temporal relationality that affects the source texts in any number of ways – for me personally, quite emphatically.

Utopian relationality

As mentioned above, despite the many dangers and risks connected to forming relational connections, all of the characters do this anyway. It can be as little as a brief moment of friendliness, as when Offred/June and Rita agree to lie about why the breakfast items are broken (p. 152; E04). It can be with an unknown party, as Offred/June’s connection with the previous Offred, and the inscriptions, letters, and narration (e.g. p. 52; E04, E09, E10). It can be entirely one-sided, as Serena Joy’s displays of benevolence toward Offred/Kate/June, for which she
expects love and loyalty that she doesn’t get (e.g. pp. 205-206; 0h55, 1h03; E02, E03, E08), or the Commander’s affection toward Offred/Kate/June, which is occasionally reciprocated by Offred, benevolently tolerated by Kate, and quietly but completely rejected by June (e.g. p. 63, p. 88, p. 137, pp. 158-59, p. 219, p. 254; 0h38-40, 0h54-55, 1h11-13; E02, E08, E09, E10). It can be sexual and explorative as in Offred/Kate/June’s interactions with Nick – these relationships are all reciprocal in one way or another, although they all attach themselves to him in varying degrees (e.g. p. 98, pp. 259-63, pp. 270-71; 0h22-23, 0h35, 1h30; E05, E06). It can be friendship, like what Offred/Kate/June shares with Moira, and to some extent with Ofglen (e.g. p. 167, p. 202, p. 222, p. 280; 1h10, 1h17; E01, E02). It can be a bond of solidarity, the way Offred and Kate sometimes act toward Janine, but just as often don’t, where June and the Handmaids in the TV series are willing to put themselves on the line for her (e.g. pp. 71-72, pp. 112-13, p. 216; 1h20; E09, E10). The drive to be a person in relation to other persons is deeply rooted in the characters, both as a desire for companionship and nearness (emotional as well as sexual), and as a way of existing through being seen to exist by others. This validation is important to the oppressed people of Gilead, but also to its architects. (In fact, no one seems needier for relational validation than the Commander.)

Another aspect of relationality to look at in the source texts is that of community, or communities. There are several obvious communities in the story, such as the ruling community (those who believe in Gilead and have fought for it), the different and entangled communities of oppressed people in Gilead (Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, Wives), the resistance, and the enforcer classes (Aunts, Eyes, Guardians). Some of these communities are encouraged and served by the societal structures in Gilead, some are fought and suppressed with violence. All of them suffer under the relational conditions of Gilead, i.e. they are associated with hierarchies, risk, lack of trust, internal policing, and other aspects of control and power, and this makes them limited in terms of what support or connectivity they can actually offer. Some of them are held together only by selfish needs – the wives come to mind here, with their jealousies and status struggles, as well as their shared needs to separate themselves from the Handmaids while simultaneously being completely dependent on them for their social standing and raison d’être (e.g. p. 115; 1h07-11; E02, E03, E09). Some of them are based in solidarity, despite the risks that come with it, such as the Handmaids in their different groupings (e.g. pairs, regional collective, those who were at the Red Centre at the same time), and the Marthas who form networks to share information between the households (e.g. p. 228; E08). Again, all of these communities or collectives are fickle, temporary, infrequent, changeable, and unreliable. They
are also sought out despite the risks connected to them, in the same way personal connections are made in spite of the situation.

In many ways relationality can be seen to be a manifestation of the utopian in the source texts. It is the site of possibility, potential, and hope, and of resisting the regime. This is where the characters take risks for the hope of something better than isolated oppression, reaching out with no guarantees for the outcome, and sometimes to unknown recipients. It is them throwing themselves at entanglements to disprove or dismantle the enforced separation of Gilead. In terms of queerness, it is also the refusal of erasure. Only heterosexual relationships are allowed in Gilead, so, forming queer ones means both conquering and undermining Gilead in those moments and connections.

**Dystopian relationality**

Dystopian relationality in Gilead is hierarchical, non-reciprocal, and oppressive. Even between the privileged classes – such as a Commander and a Wife, for instance – the bonds are fragile. As mentioned above, the Commander, despite his part in building the solitary societal structure that they all live in, seems to be most needy for relational validation. The first Offred has hung herself because he forced her to have an illegal relationship with him outside of the rape Ceremony (pp. 187-88). Narrator Offred, Kate, and June are all brought into this same illicit (and one-sided) relationship. Offred has mixed feelings toward the Commander (including pity and affection) (e.g. p. 58, p. 163, p. 188, p. 254). Kate on the other hand, while enjoying some of the privileges of their arrangement, still avoids most of his physical advances (sometimes quite boldly) (e.g. 0h38-40, 0h54-55, 0h11-13). June goes to see him because she is in captivity and servitude, unable to say no to anything he requests (E02). They all play along because they have no choice in the matter, and he takes all of their attention for genuine and voluntary, seemingly feeling important and validated in their company. The fact that their presence is coerced does not seem to bother him, and somehow, so naively, he seems genuinely disappointed when it turns out they didn’t actually feel the same way he did. Offred never shows him so definitively, but, Kate slits his throat as he kisses her, and he is stunned (1h39). When it turns out June has been lying to him and stroking his ego (E10), he is deeply hurt and enraged (Is that the injured entitlement of a teenage mass-shooter in his eyes? Is that the look of *I told you that you were pretty why won’t you love me, you disgusting fucking whore/cunt/bitch*?). The Commander’s naivety and neediness in this relational arrangement is proof of the impossibility of Gilead. He misses the past he has helped erase, and for his own fulfilment he
undermines the regime even in his own home. Notably, he finds a way to bend the rules for his Handmaid, yet he refuses to bend the rules for his Wife (most prominently in the TV series, where she tries to engage in political discussions and extra-curricular intimacy with him, e.g. E04, E06). Clearly, he does not want to engage with an equal, he just wants someone to (pretend to) appreciate him of their own free will but completely on his terms. He is needy for friction-free relational validation, where he can be king, unchallenged.

The novel gives some attention to the so-called society of women/women’s culture, in Gilead, meaning the Handmaids in relation to the Aunts and their power, and the Wives and theirs. In the novel, Offred imagines this as being something like the kind of society her mother, the radical feminist separatist, dreamed of (p. xvi, p. 127). This is also touched on by certain critics (e.g. Ehrenreich 1986; Freibert 1986; Malak 1987), where Malak finds the complicity of women in the subjugation of women to be remarkable. Why this should be remarkable, I am not entirely certain, as women are, and have historically always been, complicit in the subjugation of other people. Trading solidarity for relative freedom is something an oppressive structure like Gilead encourages and orchestrates. In bringing up these comments on women-on-women oppression, I also want to address the categorisations in Gilead as a false relationality. First of all, the regime is only interested in body parts, and so classifies anyone in the servant class with a fertile womb-and-ovaries-based reproductive system as a woman, and, anyone with an infertile womb-and-ovaries-based reproductive system as an unwoman. This classification is clearly refusing to acknowledge anything beyond binary gender, or anything beyond the classification of reproductive organs as gender, and thereby necessarily false. Further, it is only the servant classes that are thus labelled, as most Wives (also categorised as women) are not fertile, and most Aunts (also categorised as women) are too old to be fertile. These inconsistencies further destabilise the classifications and shows woman as both an insufficient and a multiple category. Gilead is not a “society of women” but a society of oppressors and oppressed, where some people populate both those categories at once.

**It’ll only take a few minutes, honey – Violence**

**Violence as relational/Violence as temporal**

All violence, aside from the self-inflicted, is necessarily relational; it is acted out by someone/something on someone/something. It can be systemic, it can be individual, it can be structural, cultural, or direct. Gilead is built on all of those types of violence, and on violent relationalities. In the sanctioned freer forms of relationality, its manifests in strict hierarchies and heavily
conditional terms (e.g. husband/wife marriage, wife/wife friendship, wife/servant hierarchy). In the sanctioned relationalities of command or servitude (e.g. Commander/Wife/Handmaid, Aunt/Handmaid, Commanders/Guardians) it manifests in control, threats of violence, rape, torture, and executions/death sentences. The violence is non-reciprocal; it has a one-directional relational movement (down). Commanders exert it over troops, Aunts, or Wives, Aunts exert it over Handmaids, Wives exert it over Marthas and Handmaids, Marthas exert it over Handmaids. Handmaids possibly exert it over themselves/one another. This violent hierarchy also depends on/encourages, complicity. For instance, the Aunts and Wives have limited rights and freedoms, maintained through their participation in the subjugation of other categories. Another relational aspect is indirect violence, that is, the violence or threat of violence against other people who will get punished for someone else’s actions. Both in Luke’s escape (E07) and in Moira’s nearly successful escape (pp. 241-243; E08), other people die because they help them. For Moira, who doesn’t get out, this makes it harder for her to try again, as she is reluctant to put others at risk. In this way, one person’s resistance remains a collective risk, which is one way the people in Gilead are discouraged from alliances and resistance. The threat of violence undermines the possibility of building trust and creating relational bonds, and, as Gilead is a regime based on oppression, that threat must remain tangible and overwhelming. One dissident cannot bring down the nation, but any type of collective resistance can become a threat, which is why the dystopian relationality is singular and why the goal of violence in Gilead is to disable trust and connectivity. Looking at the violence and oppression diffractively, one cannot help but notice its sameness, not only in the three source texts but also throughout history. The pattern of difference here is steadfastness/unchangeability/permanence in terms of the tools of aggression against oppressed minorities and marginalised groups (though these groups vary and change).

Violence in Gilead has a multiple temporality, being always now as it happens, but also always a threat (future), which gets its weight from previous violence (past). Aside from this infinite violent temporality, there is also the disruptive violence, which breaks up the timeline of the regime; bursts of counter-violence which momentarily cancels the oppressive violence. I will return to this type of violence below. The regime exists in a suspension between exerted and potential violence, and, threat, in this case, becomes its own violence. In the personal interactions, temporality in terms of endurance and anticipation also connects to the violence. For instance, in Offred/Kate/June’s life, the Aunts and Wives hide the constant possibility of explosive attacks behind a benevolent front, so the Handmaids exist in an abusive temporality
where the triggers of violence are unknown (because they are irrational) and therefore potential in any given moment (e.g. pp. 3-4, p. 91, p. 287; 0h09-12, 1h34; E01, E02, E03, E04, E10). It becomes a state of continuous anticipation and fear.

**Violence in dystopia**

In Gilead, the structural violence is massive and highly visible; it is the thing that has enabled the republic to take shape at all. It is also closely entwined with the direct violence as a method to uphold its structures. Violent attacks, a violent coup, warfare in most of the regions of the previous nation, heavily armed presence everywhere, state sanctioned executions, forcing dissidents and people of the wrong faith, sexuality, or (in the novel and film) skin-colour out, making people “choose” between death or assimilation, using violence as control to get people to acquiesce. There is no promise of a fair trial or second chance; anyone in Gilead is subject to arbitrary violence and punishment. People are crudely hung and put on display, serving both to instil fear of painful violence, and to remind people of the mercilessness of the regime in the face of transgressions or even the mere suspicion thereof.

The cultural violence is most present in the scenes from the Red Centre, where the Handmaids are indoctrinated by the Aunts (e.g. pp. 3-4, pp. 71-72, p. 91; 0h09-12, 0h16; E01, E10). They cherry-pick and modify passages from the bible to justify their ideology, and, use their volatile benevolence to keep everyone on their toes; someone who does as they are supposed to will be rewarded with appreciation (or temporary absence of violence), and those who rebel are severely punished. This happens through direct violence (e.g. zapped with cattle-prods; feet whipped with cables; eyes gouged out, e.g. p. 91, 0h12; E01, E04, E10). It also happens through cultural violence, in group sessions where the Handmaids are forced to “confess” traumatic violence from their past, such as rape, or events that are now illegal, such as abortion, to then be shamed and scorned by everyone else, until they accept the blame for their “sins”. The other Handmaids are beaten or cattle-prodded until they participate in the shaming. *Whose fault was it? Her fault, her fault, her fault* (pp. 71-72; 0h16; E01). The Aunts talk about the past as the reason why everyone is now punished with the epidemic of infertility. They place the blame of the situation on the Handmaids and their “sinful” pasts, and then present their new lives in ceremonial Christian sexual servitude as something honourable, for the good of all (e.g. p. 117; 0h06; E04). In breaking the Handmaids down to the best of their ability, the Aunts manage to force a level of devotion into some of them. Perhaps because rampant infertility was an issue even before Gilead, many of them seem to feel that bringing new children into the world is
indeed a good cause, no matter the circumstances. In the novel, Offred has a very strong urge to be pregnant and bring forth a child. Even though she rejects Gilead, she is very susceptible to the sort of joint trance the Handmaids go into when one of them is pregnant or giving birth. Not being pregnant makes her feel useless, and she has physical reactions to thinking about it or being near other Handmaids (pp. 123-26). June, on the other hand, does not want to bring a child into Gilead, she even tells Serena Joy outright (when she is already pregnant, E10). She is there for Janine as best she can, during her delivery, but does not get swept up in the trance. Kate does not seem to engage with the bigger picture and is mostly focussed on the pregnancy in terms of her relationship with Nick (1h30). Independently of how they feel about pregnancy, they are all subjected to the indoctrination which combines slut-shaming, rape-culture, conservative moralising, and physical violence, and offers redemption through the altruistic fulfilment of “biological destinies” (p. 220).

Another way that violence and the indoctrination of the Handmaids coincide is in the Particicutions and Salvagings (e.g. pp. 276-80; 1h13-18; E01, E10). The Handmaids are made to watch the Salvagings (public hangings), and to place their hands on a rope to show their support of the hanging. (In the novel and film, this is only symbolic, but in the TV series, they are forced to pull the rope that the sentenced person is actually hanged with.) Particicutions are executions carried out collectively by the Handmaids. Here, the Aunts use all of their dramatic and emotional appeal to drum up a violent frenzy. In the novel and the film, the Particicution of an alleged rapist is one of the culminating events (pp. 276-80; 1h13-18), while this happens already in the first episode of the TV series. According to the Aunts, the rapist (outrage!) has attacked a pregnant Handmaid (sacrilege!) and by raping her caused the unborn child to die (mortal sin!). Notably, at the Red Centre, rape was always the prospective Handmaid’s fault, but now, in her anointed state, she is innocent. And even though no one knows this Handmaid who was raped and lost her child (despite pregnancy being the biggest news in the region), this enrages the Handmaids to the point where they happily tear the person to pieces in a violent mob. In both the novel and the film, Offred/Kate is horrified, and stays back, while Ofglen is the first person in there, kicking the person in the head several times over. Offred/Kate is shocked, but Ofglen reveals that this was no rapist, but a political dissident who worked for the resistance. She has pushed to the fore to put him out of his misery. In the TV series, June participates in the murderous frenzy, event spearheads it, while Ofglen stands back, even though the backstory is the same (E01). In other words, in the TV series, June gets sucked into the frenzy when it is violent, but not when it is related to her purpose as a Handmaid, while the
opposite is true for Offred and Kate. The TV series also has a second Particicution, which is one of its culminating events. This time, the Handmaids are meant to stone Janine to death for attempting to steal back her child from her previous placement and killing herself and the child both by jumping off a bridge (E10). All of them are hesitant, faced with this task, surrounded by Aunts and armed Guardians. The one who speaks up first is New Ofglen, who has been giving June shit for trying to be involved with the resistance, as she just wants to keep her head down and live life the way it is here (in E05). When she is faced with being forced to kill one of the other Handmaids, however, she draws the line, loudly and clearly, even though she does not know Janine from before. New Ofglen gets brutally beaten and dragged away by the Guardians, but her actions make way for the more subdued resistance that follows. June knows she is untouchable, because she is pregnant, so she drops the rock she has been assigned for the stoning in front of Janine, and says “I’m sorry, Aunt Lydia” (which is how she was taught to apologise for insolence at the Red Centre). Everyone else in the circle follows suit. Because June is pregnant, Aunt Lydia stops the Guardians from interfering – direct violence is no longer an option. However, while Aunt Lydia lets them go at the time (marching back to their placements in slow motion to the sounds of Nina Simone’s Feeling Good, no less), she does promise them punishment down the line. The Salvagings and Particicutions are a way of combining an outlet for rage in the Handmaids, with a forced complicity in the regime, potentially making it harder for them to keep a psychological distance and maintain ideas of resistance.

There is a great deal of sexualised violence in the source texts, as the Handmaids are ritually raped by the Commanders they are stationed with (e.g. p. 79, p. 94; 0h29-30, 0h52-53; E01, E04). If they refuse or when they are spent, i.e. if they are unable to conceive in three different placements, they will be sent to the colonies to clean up toxic waste, with an expected life-span of two to three years (e.g. p. 248; 0h07; E08). Apart from this ritualised rape, which is presented as honourable Christian work, there is also the unofficial state-run brothel Jezebel’s, which I will return to in the next subchapter, and for Offred/Kate/June (and supposedly many other Handmaids) also the coercion by the Commander in their illegal private encounters. The wives have authority over the Handmaids, so if they are discovered, they risk banishment to the colonies, and the Commanders are all-powerful, so if they refuse they also risk banishment/punishment. In short, their whole existence is conditioned on sexual servitude. The people in power seem oblivious to this conditionality (e.g. the Commander’s aforementioned ideas of having a reciprocal relationship with Offred/Kate/June). Similarly, the doctor Offred/Kate/June
visits for her monthly check-up, doesn’t seem to understand that locking the door and approaching her with an “offer” to “help” impregnate her is an overwhelming threat of sexualised violence from someone who just had their fingers inside her body as she lies exposed on an examination table, stripped of all legal rights (pp. 60-61; 0h44; E04). The sexualised violence therefore operates in a kind of borderland. It is the underlying purpose of Gilead to regulate the lives and bodies of people categorised as women, so that their lives and bodies are in the service of the nation (men) in the way that the nation (men) sees fit. There is an awareness that this is something that needs to be enforced, under threat of violence, torture, death, and regulated through control, coercion, and oppression. Despite this awareness, and all the systems of control and subjugation in operation, somehow the men in charge still seem to expect gratitude, appreciation, and enthusiasm from their subjects.

Violence in dystopia is abundant, but it is not limited to the dystopian aspects of The Handmaid’s Tales. Violence is also used for utopia, which is something I will return to in the next subchapter, on resistance. I see resistance as the manifestation of utopia in the source texts, and resistance and violence as entangled; not only is violence that which is used to suppress or discourage resistance, and often that which breeds resistance, it is also a method of resistance.

**Textual violence in The Handmaid’s Tale**

Looking at cultural levels of violence, there is another dimension that I want to address, and that is the textual level of whitewashing and erasures. The story in the novel is based on a white supremacist agenda, which is explicit, but not discussed. We are made aware that people of colour are being deported (it is vaguely alluded that they may be sent to farming colonies, rather than to the nuclear waste death colonies, i.e. a repetition of slavery in the sense of agricultural servitude) (pp. 83-84, p. 248), alongside those of Jewish faith (who are given the choice to emigrate, but where it is then alluded that the ships transporting them are deliberately sunk, i.e. a repetition of the Holocaust) (p. 200, p. 307). In other words, the foundations of Gilead are deeply racist, it is a clear case of a regime driven by white supremacist ideology. However, this remains in the background of the novel. It is not something Offred, or anyone else, ever engages with. The reader is not given any insight into the lives and experiences of any such persecuted people. Connecting back to the critique brought up by Merriman (2009) and Williams (2017) above, this erasure is also coupled with a whitewashing of modes of oppression that Black people and people of colour have been subjected to historically. The novel gives examples of the types of servitude slaves were kept in, as servants, and agricultural workers, with restricted
literacy, as subjected to sexual violence, as parents stripped of the rights to their own children, which were considered a resource. But this time, it all happens to white people. Atwood even uses the underground railroad\footnote{See History.com (2009) for a summary.} as a template for the resistance’s Underground Femaileroad (p. 246). In the film, again, the white supremacy is explicit – even more so than in the novel. The early segments clearly show captured people being sorted according to skin colour, and Black people and people of colour being separated out and taken away (0h05, 0h13). This is also shown on the news (0h26). Additionally, the Commander talks about how Black people and gays wanted too much – \textit{the garbage had risen to the top} – as part of the reasoning behind Gilead (1h11-13). Despite this blatant presence, Kate still doesn’t react to it at all, apparently considering it a non-issue or unrelated to her own oppression. June and Moira update this to the 21st century: Moira is a queer person of colour, and she and June are best friends. June relies on Moira to motivate her own resistance (much like white feminists consciously or subconsciously often rely on feminists of colour to educate us, and to drive the feminist struggle relentlessly, while allowing ourselves to step away from it when it becomes too much, or too niched, or too demanding of us\footnote{E.g. Real Talk: WOC & Allies 2017; Bero 2017.}).

Luke is a person of colour and June’s own child is racialised in this version, but the TV series completely erases the white supremacist foundations of Gilead – there are Commanders, Handmaids, children, Wives, Marthas who are persons of colour – no more talk of the Children of Ham being deported or declining Caucasian birth-rates (p. 83, p. 304). While I appreciate (and expect) that a 2017 U.S. TV series is not completely devoid of people of colour in the significant roles, I do find it problematic from an intersectional feminist perspective that the solution is to erase the white supremacy, rather than bringing in different stories/experiences. Black, queer Moira (portrayed by Black, queer Samira Wiley) is the perfect hero, the hero that the story needs, a character capable of providing horizons of utopia for viewers, but the erasure of white supremacy and its role in a fundamentalist conservative right-wing Christian state (based on the historically deeply racist structures of the U.S.) is conspicuous and interferes with the potential relevance of the TV series. While my reasoning here might seem like I want it both ways, I don’t. What the story lacks is accountability. If the idea is to look specifically at white experiences of servitude in white supremacist oppression, that should, in my opinion, be clarified, somehow. As it stands, white supremacy is acknowledged in the novel and the film, but neither challenged nor examined at all. As for the TV series, while it brings in experiences of people of colour, it chooses to blot out the white supremacy, simplifying the oppression of Gilead in a stratified manner, as if misogyny could
be easily separated out of other power structures and oppressions, and as if the oppression visited upon white women would be easily comparable to that visited upon women and other people of colour. Reading these texts through one another, I am left with different strategies that allow me, as a white reader/viewer, to reject or ignore the realities of white supremacy. The novel and the film give me the opportunity to acknowledge their peripheral existence, condemn them, and then not be bothered by them again. The TV series allows me to focus on singular oppression and disregard its wider entanglements and effects. In both cases I see this as harmful erasure, which takes away from the political reach and relevance of the texts.

They shouldn’t have given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army – Resistance

Resistance and violence

There are two forms of resistance connected to the violence in the source texts. One is endurance. Enduring the violence without breaking (i.e. while holding onto one’s self and one’s opposition to the regime) renders the violence useless in a theoretical sense, while it still controls the immediate physical situation. Offred/Kate/June all use this form of resistance daily, in different ways (resigned/incredulous/resolute). Kate sometimes resists in an impulsive and indignant way, which is perhaps brave but short-sighted (e.g. 0h29-30, 0h38-40, 1h07-11). June becomes very defiant the moment she knows they can no longer kill her, but she handles it with a measure of subtlety and ambiguity – saying the right words, but clearly without the prescribed deference (E10). The other form of resistance to violence, is violence. Moira and Ofglen both use this method of resistance, as does Kate and, to an extent, June. Offred keeps dreaming of violence through objects; shears, knives, needles, matches, sharp edges for cutting, hooks for hanging. Most of the time she fantasises about suicide, but she does nothing (e.g. pp. 7-8, p. 46, p. 195, p. 209, p. 211, p. 292). Kate gets a switchblade delivered to her room from Mayday, and she uses it to slash the commanders throat (1h32, 1h39). She seems less preoccupied with suicide than both Offred and June, but it is hard to tell, as she does not have access to the narrative voice for most of the film. Moira sharpens a toilet lever at the Red Centre and uses it to escape (pp. 131-132; 0h47-49; E04), then repeats this act at Jezebel’s (in the TV series, E09). Ofglen commits the mercy killing of the captured person from Mayday in the novel and the film (p. 280; 1h16), and also hangs herself (p. 285). In the TV series, she steals a car and runs over a Guardian twice, killing him (E05). All these acts of violence are acts of resistance, which not only impact the person in that moment, but also all of the Handmaids as a reminder of the regime, and the possibilities of refusing to participate in it.
Resistance as relational
The three versions of the main protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale* all handle resistance quite differently, on different levels of self-sufficiency, and through varying connections to other characters. Offred is most of the time passive and resigned, sometimes wanting to be saved, but never wanting to affect change herself (e.g. pp. 270-71, p. 285, p. 294). Kate is in a state of helpless confusion but sometimes rebellious in the smaller personal situations, and, in the end, she does commit a radical act of violence (although for personal reasons, rather than for the good of the many) (1h39). June is in lock-down mode, taking it for the sake of her daughter, but when she realises there is “an us” – an organised resistance – she does want to make a difference, and when she herself acquires some mode of power, she no longer pretends to be subservient very well (e.g. E02, E03, E10). To me, Offred and Kate are hard to accept in their selfish and emotional helplessness. Offred is most difficult to accept, because her only interest is romance and emotional connections. Kate’s focus is also romance, but where Offred’s romantic attentions spread three ways (Luke, Nick, the Commander), Kate is solely focussed on Nick. Neither Offred’s nor Kate’s impulse to couple and indulge in romance strikes me as realistic under the circumstances (but I am, admittedly, not a straight middle-class woman in the 1980s/90s). I find Kate to be portrayed as an unruly woman-child; the story happens to her, she does not drive it, but her passivity is not the chosen complicity of Offred, who consciously avoids taking action, but rather a result of being governed by fear and emotions that overcome her. Kate is stripped of agency. Offred rejects her agency, but she still drives her story through the choices she makes, the way she chooses complicity and focuses on irrelevant things. She knows Moira is the hero, and Ofglen. She chooses not to put herself on the line for anyone. June, on the other hand, actually resists Gilead, even if it is somewhat reluctantly at first. Her resistance is not always radical, but she does not give herself to Gilead. She shuts down, she is in survival-mode. She doesn’t trust anyone in the house, not even Nick. Getting favours and forming some kind of bond doesn’t fool her into carelessness. She lies and manipulates when she can, and she performs small rebellious acts, and defiant actions (such as spitting out the macaroon Serena Joy gives her, E02, pretending to faint, E04, apologising with cold sarcasm after she has been beaten, E10, and coyly playing the Commander, E09, E10). While she herself does not take any initiative to start up or connect to a broader resistance and hesitates when Ofglen first brings up Mayday (E01), she wants to do something, particularly after Ofglen is replaced (E02, E03). She refuses to consider Gileadean life normal and acceptable, and she is loyal to the other Handmaids (such as Janine, Alma, and Ofglen) even when it puts her at risk (E03, E10). Moira inspires her, but in this version, she, too, is rebellious and brave. In the end,
she is the one who reminds Moira of the fighting spirit she had, pushing her to attempt another escape (E09). The alliance June forms with Nick is very loose and has nothing to do with placing her life in his hands. She doesn’t want him to save her, she just wants someone to be June with again, all the while fully aware that she knows nothing of his motivations.

In all three versions, the ones who do most to rebel are Moira and Ofglen. To me, a queer, it is significant that these are the queer characters we get to know. Moira is explicitly lesbian in all three texts, while Ofglen is only explicitly anything (a lesbian) in the TV series (e.g. p. 171; 0h07; E01, E02). Going back to temporality, and Moira’s awareness of the need to be prepared and to fight back, I don’t think their queerness is a coincidence, but rather a condition of their resistance. They are not fighting for their heterosexual progeny/normative futurity. They are fighting because Gilead denies their existence and kills them and other queers (they are only alive because fertility outweighs “gender treachery”) and because this is nothing new to them. It has happened before, and they already knew it could happen again. Their visibility and existence before Gilead was already conditioned and unstable. They have everything to lose (their lives) but they have also already lost everything; their life in Gilead is not a matter of shutting down and taking it, as much as an erasure of their entire existence. They fight because that is what being queer means. In this, I see Muñoz’s queer horizon and singular plural (2009), the fight is always now because queer is always the horizon, and whether or not this is an explicit goal, the fight is always for future queers, too. Not our biological children and known successors but for the queers we know will always exist in straight societies, who need a past and a future through us. Moira is twice a long-time friend of the main protagonist, although Offred is a homophobe who stops hugging Moira for a time after she comes out, and then mainly tolerates her (p. 171). June, however, has Moira as her closest friend, and treats her as a family member (e.g. E01, E04, E08, E09). Moira and Kate have no previous relationship but form a quick friendship in the film. In all three texts, Moira keeps trying to escape; she is not afraid to use violence and has no mercy for the Aunts (e.g. p. 91, pp. 131-32; 0h47-49; E04, E09). Her attempts vary in success, and both in the book and the film, Offred/Kate see her for the last time at Jezebel’s and remain unaware of what happens to her after that (pp. 233-40; 1h21-30). June comes back to Jezebel’s after the first visit in hopes of aiding Mayday and seeing Moira again. When she does, she implores her not to give up, reminding her of how they used to talk at the Red Centre. This spurs Moira to sharpen another toilet lever, steal a Guardian’s outfit and car, and take off, making it all the way to Canada (E09). June pushing Moira seems to be related to the way that she has kept Moira as a moral compass and motivation throughout her own
experiences in Gilead. She needs Moira to keep going, because she needs Moira to keep her going. As far as Jezebel’s goes, Offred/Kate/June seem to see it as a situation worse than their own, even though they are also in sexual servitude. They are morally differently situated, however, as they are supposed to bring forth offspring, while Moira is there for the Commanders’ and trade delegates’ illicit pleasure. Moira’s being at Jezebel’s is not a “free choice” as for a sex worker in a different kind of society – she has been captured, probably raped and tortured, and made to choose between Jezebel’s and cleaning up nuclear waste in the colonies. It is a choice, but not a free choice. The people who work at Jezebel’s to service the Commanders and trade delegates do not have any rights or protection, and their payment is not monetary or independent, so, it is not a free work situation. However, this applies to the Handmaids as well, and I do find that the way it is portrayed places a moralising judgement on Moira that is different because her sexual servitude is not tied to biblical procreation ceremonies. There is no technical difference between being a Handmaid and being a worker at Jezebel’s, forced to sexual acts against one’s will, in exchange for a place to sleep, food, and one’s life. It could even be argued that being a Handmaid is more objectionable, morally, as they are complicit in populating Gilead, and supplying its creators with offspring, so that they can construct a heteropatriarchal futurity. Going further, supplying them with the national resource of fertility (which they even use for trade purposes in the TV series) (E06). At Jezebel’s, the workers instead undermine the very foundations of Gilead, living proof of its fragility and hypocrisy; the architects of Gilead indulging in illegal sex without Christian purpose, pre-Gileadean aesthetics of femininity, aimless pleasure. In this sense, even though Moira is admittedly resigned when Offred/Kate/June finds her at Jezebel’s, she is still rebelling. She is even allowed to live out her own sexuality there, without fear of death, as long as it doesn’t infringe on her work. It is a rejection of prescribed relationality and it chips away at the monolith of Gileadean traditional family values of holy matrimony/holy procreation.

**Resistance as temporal/Resistance as hope and utopia**

Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale* has multiple temporalities at once. One kind is suspended; the potentially finite temporality of any act of resistance. Acts, thoughts, ideas of resistance all exist in a terrified suspension, waiting to be discovered and punished. They are acts carried out against hope – this is not allowed, this will never work, this will lead to pain/punishment/death if I am discovered, *and yet*. Therefore, they happen one finite moment after the next, only in the time already passed, never expecting a future. It only happened if it worked, and so it is always past and finite. But, at the same time, it only happens for the future. In this sense it is
both finite and infinite, impossible and possible/potential, at once. In some ways, it harnesses hope, creates a flash of the horizon in the now, as a manifestation of utopia in the dystopia: The moment when Offred and Ofglen look one another in the eyes for the first time and suspend isolation (p. 167); the moment June drops the rock on the grass next to Janine, turning the tables of control on Aunt Lydia (E10); the moment Kate slits the Commander’s throat and he withers in her arms, voiceless, powerless, and taken by surprise (1h39) – all of those moments the future hope of Gilead in ruins, manifested in the present.

This is how resistance destabilises the dystopia; by poking holes in it, denying it power, being impervious to it. By staying queer, daring to be loyal, joining forces/causes. By speaking, writing, connecting. By remembering one’s own name and remembering another’s. By witnessing its hollowness and holding the hands of those who undermine it from within. By proving it insufficient, flawed, fragile. By slipping into the entanglements that give the lie to fundamentalist, hierarchical, categorical “purity”. Resistance is the hoping against hope, the violence to counter violence, and the singular plural of the tentative, dispersed collective that means possibility/horizon. In Gilead, resistance is utopia both in its manifestation of potential future in the now, and in its braving the risk of disappointment in order to commit to hope.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I have attempted to show how I find utopia and dystopia manifested in the three versions of The Handmaid’s Tale that have been my primary source texts for this thesis. I have centred on temporality, relationality, violence, and resistance as the entangled lenses through which I read the texts and see them projected. I have examined the rigidly regulated utopia of Gilead, envisioned and enforced by the Commanders, as well as its oppressive dystopian realities in the lives of the protagonists. Additionally, I have investigated the utopian hopes and horizons for those protagonists, both as the not-yet of future possibility and as the right-now forward flashes of resistance. In the beginning of this thesis, I ask whether these utopian/dystopian imaginings want radically different things, or whether they are parts of the same whole, put together differently. My conclusion is yes and no. Once upon a time (1985), Offred wanted what she had before; the child, Luke, wifehood, motherhood. She wanted hand-lotion, glossy magazines, and moderation (her feminist mother: too much; out lesbian Moira: too much; separatism: too much; the Commander: at least better looking than the last guy). Her way forward was a hope to get back. If she couldn’t get Luke, fine, she would make do with Nick (as long as she had someone to be a Woman with). Kate at least wants away (in 1990).
Yes, she still wants to be validated by a heterosexual relationship, and she wants to procreate with her partner, so that they can live on through their genetic offspring. But she also rejects the Commander and his clumsy advances; she is his unruly girl-woman until someone gives her a switchblade, and then she slits his throat with one single cut. At that point she becomes a revolutionary, if only for a moment. In the end, she is the revolutionary’s girlfriend, hiding in the mountains, carrying his child. In 2017, June wants to fuck shit up, at least eventually. She goes from enduring to resisting, and she is only just getting started (because that is the logic of a TV series). All of these Handmaids and their tales are ambushed by Gilead and the sudden stripping of their (relative) privileges. They are three middle-class, white women, who never thought it could happen to them. Offred and Kate are children of their time, and some of the cluelessness they have that irks me today, June has shed. She is read through the novel and film, and through all three entangled contexts, and doesn’t go through their joint story the same way as her other versions. She addresses some of the improbabilities, rejects the passive complicity, develops a healthy scepticism in terms of the relationship with Nick. She engages with the resistance, understanding her responsibility. Yes, she wants to have her past back, but she also wants to crush the regime. She wants to rip it apart and have a better life alongside the other Handmaids. In that sense, she is the version of Offred who sees utopia as most different from the before and from Gilead. However, she still seems to be something of a pussyhat revolutionary, wanting momentum and support from others to keep her in the fight, and with simplified understandings of feminist causes and struggles. She wants back to liberal capitalism, but with new awareness of the precariousness of her human rights, new vigilance against civil rights infringements, and online articles on ten ways to smash the patriarchy. (*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches.*) It is different from Gilead, but built with the same tools: nuclear families, heteronormative futurity, capitalist financial structure, nation state, romantic love, womanhood as motherhood, binary understandings of gender. The way I see it, the “radically different” comes into the story through queerness, through Ofglen and Moira. They both refuse the heterosexual agenda and the (continued, amped up) oppression of the patriarchy through the age-old methods of rape, violence, and persecution. They are not ambushed by Gilead; they are prepared. Reluctant to accept reality, but prepared, and not surprised. (*Look out. Here it comes.*) They know about capital punishment for queers in Nigeria, they know about Chechnyan death camps. They know about innumerable hate-crimes, murders, beatings, persecutions; they know that queer is only ever on the horizon. So, they

---

44 I’m referring to the Women’s Marches in 2017 and 2018, which have been criticised for their white feminist, universalising, cisheterosexist tendencies, e.g. Peoples 2017; Quarshie 2018.
resist, run, fight back, organise, exist. Queerness is their self-defence against Gilead, and their resistance, as they are forced into a dystopia of heterosexual futurity blown out of proportion. Rape, reproduction, rinse, repeat, and, the only time is biological time. They are perpetually disidentified (as in partially aligned with; as in restoring through performance) with what Gilead tells them they are, through their queerness. They are given labels: gender traitor, woman, Handmaid. Gender traitor is a term for a crime with capital punishment, but who wouldn’t want to be one in a totalitarian regime that denies anything but cisgender normativity? Woman may be a category that used to fit them, but how can it continue to fit when they are simultaneously erased from it as non-existent? Handmaid is both their life-line, and what kills them, but they hollow out the category with their queerness, defy their own illegality by infiltrating the genepool of the oppression with deviant cells – by existing. Queerness is a radically different thing, and Ofglen watches her girlfriend’s execution from inside a van (cuffed, screaming) and steals a car that she runs over a Guardian twice (backwards, forwards) until his brains are splashed across the market square because she is here, and she is queer (E03, E05). Queerness is a radically different thing, and Moira doesn’t stop escaping (once, twice, three times, and again) and doesn’t shy away from violence (killing a Guardian with a toilet lever and escaping in his blood-soaked uniform) to prove that she is still here, still queer (p. 91, pp. 131-32, pp. 241-43; 0h21-23, 0h47-49; E03, E08, E09).

I entangled myself in the source texts, characters, and plots to examine if there was any room for utopian hope and queer horizons in The Handmaid’s Tale – if these imaginings of utopia/dystopia could mean something outside of fiction (have any political potential). I started with June, and, true to my habit I very reluctantly admitted that I, a thirty-something, white, middle-class woman (i.e. likely a high-percentage match with the demographic of the TV series) felt things when I saw it. When I met Kate, I was blown away by the romanticising and sexualising of what, to me, seemed like such a political text (in all honesty, I blamed Harold and Volker for that). I was convinced Offred would be more like June, and so my disappointment was even greater with her. She was speaking to me in her own words – I couldn’t blame a scriptwriter who muted her narration, or a director who felt she said it best with partial nudity and sheer fabrics. Yet, there she was, passive, preoccupied with inconsequential things, distracted by the dryness of her skin. With June, at least I felt there was some connection to the current state of the world – an awareness of the risks connected with taking civil rights and liberties for granted, of the many gradual steps that predate totalitarianism, of how short a time a category such as woman has brought with it any wielding power at all. How limited it still is. June emerges
through Kate and Offred and 2017 and Donald Trump’s America and Polish abortion laws and Mike Pence and fascist CasaPound in Italy and Charlottesville and a rapist in the White House rather than a woman and Emma González and Supreme Court cases about bakers’ rights to refuse gay wedding cakes and migration authorities sending queer refugees back to death sentences and #metoo and “free elections” in Russia and Egypt with only one candidate and Spain suppressing Catalan independence and Stormy Daniels maybe finally bringing down the U.S. administration46 and solidarity being a cost in capitalism. I don’t think the imaginaries of The Handmaid’s Tale can be seen as anything but entangled in the times, and whether it is commercial fiction or not is perhaps not so significant. Despite its conspicuous and significant erasures, I believe the story reaches some audiences in a political way, and perhaps those audiences that see revolution in June (or Offred, or Kate) are the ones who need to be reached most47 (well, second most, after all the would-be Commanders of the world). But Offred/Kate/June’s revolution (revolution adjacent activities/thoughts of revolution) are not enough for me. My utopian hope is the queer horizons that Moira and Ofglen conjure; the possibility of existing; the potential in existing; the commitment to existing.

I set out writing a thesis on three versions of The Handmaid’s Tale because I needed to look for utopia in the dystopia that I saw there, and in my now, looming. I, a queer, wasn’t necessarily anticipating finding queerness in that utopia or getting involved in the temporality, relationality, and entanglements of narrative, utopia, and queerness in connection with the primary source texts. While I found theories of postmodern and feminist utopian thought that rejects blueprints and closure and makes the “good place” ambiguous, fluid, and critical, I also found that the only utopia through which I can see the without from within, or the radically different society imagined from this radically same society of cisheteronormative neoliberal capitalism, is queer utopia/queerness as utopia/utopia as queer. With that in mind, I believe interesting theorising could come from looking closer at solidarity, responsibility, and the anti-antirelational in connection with utopia, and from mapping the potential in dispersed collectivity.

Moira, I’ll see you there!

---

46 E.g. Santora & Berendt 2018; Clymer 2018; Jones 2018; Heim 2017; Vice 2017; Riotta 2017; The Guardian 2018b; Liptak 2017; Salomón 2018; Kvist 2018; Zacharek, Dockerman & Sweetland Edwards 2017; Davidson & Tolba 2018; Kim 2018; Birnbaum 2017; Ganeva 2018.
47 E.g. Scott 2018; Bianco 2017; Ryan, E G 2017.
References

*Apocalypse Now* 1979 [Film] American Zoetrope, USA.


Bartkowski, F 1989, *Feminist Utopias*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.


Bianco, M 2017, ‘Roy Moore’s white female voters are part of a long history of internalized misogyny’, *NBC News*, viewed 20 April 2018, 

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/catalonias-fired-leaders-show-up-to-work-at-least-for-a-little-while/2017/10/30/9a33976c-bcf6-11e7-9294-705f80164f6e_story.html?utm_term=.fd159d20e615>. 


Bonnie and Clyde 1967 [Film] Warner Brothers, USA.

Bouson, J B 1993, Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.


Chinatown 1974 [Film] Paramount Pictures, USA.


Clark, M 1990, ‘Timely “Tale” has Feminist and Science Fiction Appeal’, USA Today, 7 March, p. 04D.


Godfather, The [Film] Paramount Pictures, USA.


The Guardian 2018a, ‘Bermuda becomes first jurisdiction in the world to repeal same-sex marriage’, viewed 20 April 2018,


-- 2018b, ‘Emma González’s powerful March for Our Lives speech’, viewed 20 April 2018,


Halberstam, J 2003, ‘What’s That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives’, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, vol. 2, no. 1, viewed 4 April 2018,


*Handmaid’s Tale, The* 1990 [Film] Bioskop Film, USA/Germany.

*Handmaid’s Tale, season 1, The* 2017 [TV series] MGM Television, USA.


Heim, J 2017, ‘Recounting a day of rage, hate, violence and death’, *Washington Post*, viewed 20 April 2018,


History.com 2009, Underground Railroad, viewed 20 April 2018,
<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad>.


Holodny, E 2017, ‘From private school tax breaks to bigger inheritances, 7 ways rich people win big if tax reform passes’, Business Insider, viewed 20 April 2018,


Human Rights Watch 2017, Brazil: Reject Abortion Ban, viewed 20 April 2018,


Internet Movie Database n.d., The Handmaid’s Tale (1990), viewed 17 April 2018,
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099731/?ref_=nv_sr_5>.


Jones, T 2018, ‘The fascist movement that has brought Mussolini back to the mainstream’, The Guardian, viewed 20 April 2018,


Kehr, D 1990, “Handmaid’s Tale” loses everything in this translation*, *Chicago Tribune*, 16 March, p. B.


Mad Men 2007-2015 [TV series] Lionsgate Television, USA.


Mercer, N R 2013, “‘Subversive Feminist Thrusts”’: Feminist Dystopian Writing and Religious Fundamentalism in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, Louise Marley’s The Terrorists of Irustan, Marge Piercy’s, She and It, and Sheri S. Tepper’s Raising the Stones’, PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison.


Miner, M 1991, “‘Trust Me”': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale’, in H Bloom (ed) 2001, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s
Tale: Modern Critical Interpretations, Chelsea House Publishers, Broomall, pp. 112-137.


Neuman, S 2006, “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and The Handmaid’s Tale’, University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 75, no. 3, pp. 857-868, Literature Resource Center, viewed 14 January 2018,


Orange is the New Black 2013- [TV series] Lionsgate Television, USA.

Oxford Reference c. 2018, Grand Narrative, viewed 31 March 2018,


St Andrews, B 1986, Forbidden Fruit: On the Relationship Between Women and Knowledge in Doris Lessing, Selma Lagerlöf, Kate Chopin, and Margaret Atwood, Whiteston, Troy, NY.


Thompson, A 2016, ‘The Logic Defying Double-Slit Experiment is Even Weirder Than You Thought’, Popular Mechanics, viewed 29 March 2018,

*Top of the Lake* 2013, 2017 [TV series] See-Saw Films, UK/Australia/New Zealand/USA.


Appendix

Part I

A Brief Outline of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

At the end of the 20th century, the U.S. has a tangible problem with fertility as a result of several factors (nuclear plant disasters along the San Andreas fault-line, a virus, increased rates of abortion and contraceptive use), and also climbing rates of rape, murder, and sexualised violence. A Christian fundamentalist network called the Sons of Jacob form, plotting a *coup d’état*, and a new nation called the Republic of Gilead. This republic is to be based on certain parts of the bible, and is to be a strictly hierarchal society, run exclusively by men. One of their goals is to repopulate the nation, a plan which they mean to implement through the use of forced surrogates, Handmaids, impregnated through religious ritual rape. A terrorist attack carried out by the Sons of Jacob and blamed on Islamist extremists, in which the president and most of congress is wiped out, opens the U.S. up to a state of emergency, infringements on rights, and a subsequent suspension of the constitution. This is followed by new laws forbidding women to work and own property, nullifying any second marriages, and preventing people from leaving Gilead. A civil war erupts, the Gileadean regime deports and displaces people who are no longer desirable (explicitly mentioned are people of colour, Jewish people, homosexuals/queers, people classified as “unwomen” because of infertility, dissidents, nuns, Baptists, and Quakers) and capture those who have wombs and are fertile.

The main protagonist of the story – Offred (also known as Kate in the film, and June in the TV series) – is a fertile woman who is captured when she is trying to cross the border into Canada with her daughter and her husband. She is separated from them and does not know what happens to them, and she is taken to an internment for people classified as fertile women called the Rachel and Leah Re-Educational Centre or the “Red” Centre, to be forcibly trained to be a Handmaid. (In the novel, the fate of her husband Luke remains unknown, in the film, Luke is killed, in the TV series Luke is injured but makes it to Canada. In all three texts Offred’s child is placed with other people in Gilead, and Offred is eventually told this, but not allowed to see the child.) At the Red Centre, she and other Handmaids are watched, trained and punished by Aunts, older non-fertile persons who work for the regime. At the Red Centre Offred meets Moira, who, in the novel and TV series, is her long-time friend, and in the film a new acquaintance she makes on the bus over to the centre. Discipline and violence abound at the centre, as the Handmaids are prepared for their placements in the homes of Gilead’s ruling class, the Commanders. In the novel, Fred and Serena Joy are Offred’s third and last posting (a
Handmaid only gets to try three placements to get pregnant) and several years have passed since the Gileadean coup. In the film, it is her first posting. In the TV series, the time-frame is three years after the capture, and it is her second posting.

Offred is a captive in their house, allowed only to go get groceries with another Handmaid, and constantly monitored by military, intelligence, and the other members of the household. Most of her time she is meant to just wait in her room, eat food from a tray, and prepare for the Ceremony (the ritual rape) which happens once a month. The house is run by Commander Fred Waterford and his wife Serena Joy, both of them active in the founding of Gilead. The Commander is often busy elsewhere, and Serena Joy has a love/hate relationship with the Handmaid – she is desperate for a child but does not like to have Offred there. There are also servants in the house, two Marthas called Rita and Cora, and the driver, Nick, who is also an Eye (intelligence officer), and connected to Mayday (the resistance, but certainty of this varies between the versions).

Offred soon forms a connection with Nick. In the novel and film, they flirt and become romantic very quickly, in the TV series, the connection is more tentative, less trusting, and less like a romantic coupling. The Commander struggles with the Ceremonies, because he finds them impersonal, and so he forces Offred to meet him in secret in his study, to form a more personal bond. These meetings look different in the three texts. In the novel, they consistently play scrabble, and he lets Offred read and look in women’s magazines from before, he drinks and talks and enjoys himself, and he makes her kiss him good night like she “means” it. The film remains similar, but she refuses the kisses and advances (he makes more of them) for most of it. In the TV series they do play scrabble and other board-games, and she reads and looks at women’s magazines in front of him, but he makes no advances until much later. In all three texts, he eventually takes her out, dressed in clothes from before and with make-up on, to Jezebel’s, a brothel in an old hotel, for trade delegates, businessmen, and Commanders. At Jezebel’s he forces her to have sex with him (he thinks she wants to). As time at the posting progresses, it becomes less likely that Offred will conceive and in all likelihood the Commander is sterile, but that is no longer a possible thing to say. Serena Joy suggests that they try another option and orchestrates a coupling between Offred and Nick.

Offred’s shopping partner Ofglen is part of Mayday, and she tries to get Offred to give them information. In the novel, Offred is cautiously interested but stops focusing on Mayday as soon
as she becomes involved with Nick. In the film, Ofglen puts more pressure on her, and while Offred (Kate) is less invested, she does carry out the mission that they have for her – she slits the Commander’s throat. In the TV series, Offred (June) is more eager to get involved after she finds out Mayday exists, and after Ofglen is replaced, but she is less connected to it. Offred’s friendship with Ofglen is most elaborated on in the TV series, where Ofglen’s own story is more fleshed out.

Moira, Offred’s friend, escapes from the Red Centre while they are both there together (in the film and TV series, she escapes with the help of Offred (Kate/June)). Offred does not know what happens to her after, until they meet again, at Jezebel’s, where Moira is working. In the novel and film, that is the last Offred sees of Moira, but in the TV series, Offred (June) persuades Moira to make another attempt to escape. She does, and, makes it to Canada.

Towards the end of the three texts, Offred is pregnant. That is to say, in the novel, this is only vaguely conveyed as wishful (but plausible) thinking, between Nick and Offred, in the film it is certain (and followed up with a pregnant Offred (Kate) in the mountains after her escape), in the TV series it is confirmed by a pregnancy test that Serena Joy forces on Offred (June). In all three texts, it is revealed/alluded to around the same time that Serena Joy uncovers the Commander’s secret meetings with Offred, which is the event that sets off the final escape/capture. In the film, Offred (Kate) murdering the Commander is added as her final act before she gets taken away by what looks like the Eyes (but turns out to be Mayday, on behalf of Nick). In the TV series, Offred (June), sheltered by her status as pregnant, refuses to stone another Handmaid to death in a Particicution, instigating a strike among the Handmaids alongside the New Ofglen. When she gets taken away she assumes it is her punishment, but Nick tells her to trust him and just go with them, just as he does in the novel. Season one of the TV series ends much like Offred’s part of the novel – openly and uncertainly. We don’t know whether she is about to be saved or punished.

The novel has an added section, the Historical Notes, which is set in a 2195 conference on Gileadean studies. Though quite far in the future, the conference has a traditional, hierarchical and sexist academic structure, and while it shows us that Gilead has, in fact, ended, it also shows that not much has changed in that sense. It also provides some information relating to the story: Offred’s experiences have been pieced together from a box of cassette tapes on which she recorded her story. They have been organised by researchers, so the order is not necessarily the
intended one. The existence of the tapes speaks for Offred’s escape, or at least temporary escape. They have been unable to ascertain her pre-Gileadean name. Other information is more general; how Gilead came about; purges and persecutions within the regime and among the Commanders (this likely happened to Offred’s Commander); the way the resistance worked. Much of the information in the Historical Notes is used in the TV series to expand the story and the characters, and some of it is used to inform the last short segment of the film, even though the conference and the future setting of the Historical Notes are not used at all.

Appendix

Part II

List of Characters

Offred – Offred is the main protagonist. In both the (main part of the) novel and the film, everything is seen from her perspective. In the novel and in the TV series, she is the first-person narrator, but the TV series also leaves her perspective occasionally to show (non-narrated) events that she has no knowledge of. In the film, she only narrates the very last few minutes when she is hiding out in the mountains, pregnant and waiting for Nick. Offred is a white, middle-class woman in her thirties. She is educated, and before the laws changed she had a job (in the novel she digitalises books for a library, in the film she is a librarian, in the TV series an assistant book editor). Offred is fertile; a few years before Gilead she had a child with her spouse. The three of them try to escape the regime but get caught. The events Offred experiences remain similar throughout the three texts, but her drive as a character and the way she reacts and relates to them is quite different between the versions. In the novel, the only name we get for her is Offred (her Handmaid name for the current posting, “of Fred”), but, in the film, we also learn, her given name is Kate, and, in the TV series, it is June.

Moira – In all three texts, Moira is a lesbian, or, “gender traitor”, in Gileadean terms. She is a friend of Offred’s; in the novel and TV series they have been close friends since college, in the film, they meet on the bus to the Red Centre. In the novel, Moira works with a feminist, lesbian separatist printing collective, is politically active, organises protests, and tries to escape Gilead before Offred and her family. Offred has a tolerant (i.e. unaware homophobic) relationship with her, where she stopped hugging Moira for a time after she came out, or, as Offred puts it, after she “decided to prefer women” (p. 172). In the film, we don’t find out very much about Moira’s life, but, just as in the novel, she is rebellious and bold in resisting the regime (trying to escape multiple times, using violence, being explicitly sexual). In the TV series, Moira and June are
very close friends. Moira before Gilead is political, but seemingly not as radical as in the novel. Again, she tries to get out before Offred and her family, and again, she tries to escape and rebel after she is caught. In all three texts, she ends up at Jezebel’s after a failed escape attempt leads to capture, torture (possible rape), and the “choice” between Jezebel’s and cleaning up nuclear waste until she dies. In the novel and the film, Offred never sees her or hears from her again after their brief encounter at Jezebel’s, but in the TV series they have more contact – three meetings at Jezebel’s on two different nights, and later a message from Moira to Offred (June) – and Offred (June) demands that Moira gets back into fighting spirit and tries to get out again. Which she does, successfully.

Ofglen/Ofsteven – Ofglen is Offred’s shopping partner, the person she spends most of her time with outside of the house. At first, they both think the other is overly pious and most likely regime-friendly, but after a while they figure out that they are both against Gilead. Ofglen is part of the resistance (Mayday) and the person who tells Offred about it for the first time. In the novel, Ofglen tries to enlist Offred’s help for the cause, encouraging her to get information from the commander. Offred is mildly interested at first, but when she starts her relationship with Nick, she loses all interest. Ofglen commits suicide right before she is about to get taken away for questioning, probably tipping her hand when she performs a mercy-killing of another member of the resistance at a Particution. In the film, Ofglen is the one who orders Offred (Kate) to kill the commander and tells her a knife has been placed in her room. The TV series gives Ofglen much more space, and a backstory; she was married to a woman and had a son, she is labelled a “gender traitor” by the regime, but kept because she is fertile, she is involved with Mayday and tries to get Offred’s (June’s) help gathering information from the Commander. Ofglen is involved with one of the Marthas and gets caught. The Martha is hanged (in front of her) and she is subjected to forced genital cutting and placed in a new house (her name becomes Ofsteven). After this she loses her connection to Mayday because she is compromised, and one day in the market, she steals a car and runs over a Guardian, killing him. After this she is captured again.

Janine/Ofwarren/Ofdaniel – Janine is one of the other Handmaids Offred meets at the Red Centre. In all three texts, she finds it hard to adapt and has unstable mental health. She is subjected to punishment and goes back and forth between complying and refusing. In the TV series, she gets an eye gouged out on the first day, for insolence. In all three texts, she gets pregnant. In the novel and the film, the child is declared an “unbaby”/“a shredder” a short while
after she gives birth and does not survive. In the TV series, the child is healthy, and Janine has trouble letting go of it; she attempts suicide but doesn’t succeed.

**Commander Fred (Waterford)** – The Commander is only conclusively named Fred in the novel, and there are two possible surnames given in the Historical Notes, but what we know about him means Waterford is the likelier candidate, which has been picked up in the film and the TV series. He is one of the early architects of Gilead, in all three texts, and deeply involved in the regime. He has a background in market research and has had much input on the “packaging” of Gilead, the ways to “sell” it to the masses. In both the novel and the film, he is portrayed as older, with grey hair, but in the TV series he is younger. Even though he is one of the people who conceived of Gilead, he has trouble adhering to the rules. He has a collection of old magazines, he likes to frequent the brothel where the workers are dressed as in the old days, and he has secret meetings with his Handmaids, in part to make the ritual rape (the Ceremony) less impersonal, because he has trouble doing his part when it is.

**Serena Joy** – Serena Joy is the Commander’s wife. In the novel and film, she used to be a prominent fundamentalist Christian televangelist gospel singer, who promoted Gileadean values, and helped the regime gain support. In the TV series, she was a prominent architect of Gileadean laws and foundational ideas, alongside her husband. She also wrote the book *A Woman’s Place* and promoted so called traditional values/domestic feminism. As Gilead becomes reality (in all three texts), however, she is no longer allowed to participate in political work, or, even read – all things she helped get put into law. She is still supportive of the regime but bitter and aggressive, and unhappy in her personal life.

**Nick** – Nick is the Commander’s driver. In the novel and film, he is a handsome, devil-may-care flirt, who initiates illicit contact with Offred very early on (eye-contact; touching; speaking to her when they are alone; facilitating the Commander’s meetings with her). He is most likely an Eye, i.e. secret intelligence, but also possibly connected to Mayday. In the novel, this remains vague, in the film, he is explicitly part of Mayday. In the TV series, Nick is more toned down, and while he and Offred (June) have out-of-the-ordinary interactions early on (banter; shared irreverence), they do not have a quick and wild romance, but rather a hesitant and wary physical relationship, reluctant to fully trust one another but also starved for some kind of intimacy. Unbeknownst to Offred (June), Nick turns out to have been involved with the Sons of Jacob since well before the coup, and has been driving for several of the higher-ups, as well as
gathering intelligence on them for the regime. In other words, his status as an Eye is confirmed in the TV series, but his ties with Mayday are vague. He is shown to do black-market deals, and he agrees to try to impregnate Offred (June), although it is punishable by death, so he is not a “true believer” who follows Gileadean law to the letter, but as he (supposedly) helps Offred escape it is unclear whether he is doing a one-off thing for her, or whether he is connected to Mayday.

**Luke** – Luke is Offred’s husband. Their relationship began as an affair while Luke was still married to his previous wife. (Gilead does not recognise divorce, which makes their marriage null and void.) They have a daughter who is young (around 3-5 years old when the coup happens). Luke is against Gilead but doesn’t want Offred to attend protests (in the novel). When they try to escape Luke gets shot. In the novel, whether or not he survives is unclear, in the film he dies and has very little part in the story, in the TV series he survives and makes it to Canada with the help of people in the resistance.

**The child/Jill/Hannah** – Offred and Luke have a child (called Jill in the film, and Hannah in the TV series). The child gets separated from her parents when they try to escape, and Offred remains unaware of what has happened to her until well into her time at the Waterford house. Serena Joy finds out where the child has been placed and uses this information to manipulate/ control Offred. In the novel and film, Serena Joy shows Offred a photo, and in the TV series she makes Offred watch her from afar, locked in a car, as she has a little chat with Hannah on the front steps of a building. Offred is not allowed to speak to her child in any of the versions.

**Aunt Lydia, Aunt Elisabeth, Aunt Sara** – The Aunts are the controlling officers who handle the Handmaids in training and in their later postings. They indoctrinate, reprimand, punish, and torture the Handmaids, and are responsible for preparing them for the duties of their postings (i.e. the Ceremony). They also handle the Salvagings (public executions) and Participations (where the Handmaids act as executioners), as well as the Birth Days (where the local Handmaids support the one giving birth) and other special events where the Handmaids are present as a group. Aunt Lydia is the one that has the most prominent role. She is full of sadistic zeal under a mask of false pious benevolence.

**Previous Offred** – The Handmaid placed at the Waterford house before Offred/Kate/June was also called Offred. At first, Offred doesn’t know why or how her posting ended, but eventually
the fact that she committed suicide is confirmed. Previous Offred has left a message carved into the wall of the closet: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, and it is in her attempt to decipher this that Offred finds out that previous Offred was involved with the Commander, too, and learns more about her.

**New Ofglen** – As Ofglen disappears (by suicide in the novel and film, and by being transferred in the TV series) a New Ofglen shows up at the gate to go shopping with Offred. This is without warning, and Offred does not know what has happened to Ofglen at first. In the novel and film, their interactions are limited, in the TV series she gets more space. Offred (June) tries to ask her about Mayday and gets shut down; New Ofglen does not want any trouble, she just wants to keep her head down. To her, life in Gilead is much better than what she had before. However, when the Handmaids are ordered to stone one of their own to death, New Ofglen is the first one to refuse despite the risk it puts her in.

**Rita, Cora** – Rita and Cora are the Marthas, i.e. maids/cooks, who work in the Commander’s household.
### Library Information Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presentation Date</th>
<th>Department and Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 June 2018</td>
<td>Department of Thematic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TEMA, Gender Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publishing Date (Electronic version)</th>
<th>ISBN: (Licentiate thesis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 June 2018</td>
<td>ISRN: LIU-TEMA G / GSIC2-A-18/005-SE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Type of Publication</th>
<th>ISRN: (Licentiate thesis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X English</td>
<td>Licentiate thesis</td>
<td>ISRN: LIU-TEMA G / GSIC2-A-18/005-SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree thesis</td>
<td>Title of series (Licentiate thesis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis C-level</td>
<td>Series number/ISSN (Licentiate thesis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis D-level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (Specify below)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>URL, Electronic Version</th>
<th>Publication Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-148928">http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-148928</a></td>
<td>Moira, take me with you! – Utopian Hope and Queer Horizons in Three Versions of <em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedvig Marx</td>
<td>Using postmodern, feminist and queer notions of utopia/dystopia and narrative theory, this thesis contains an analysis of <em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em> (novel 1985; film 1990; TV series S01 2017) based on theoretical and methodological understandings of utopia/dystopia and narrative as deeply connected with notions of <em>temporality</em> and <em>relationality</em>, and of <em>violence</em> and <em>resistance</em> as the modes of expression of utopia and dystopia in the source texts. The analysis is carried out in an explorative manner (Czarniawska 2004) and utilises the notion of “disidentification” (Butler 1993; Muñoz 1999) and the concepts of “diffraction” (Haraway 1992, 1997; Barad 2007, 2010), and “entanglement” (Barad 2007). The conclusion becomes that utopia and dystopia in <em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em> are, to a great extent, imagined within the same system of understanding, but that utopian hope can be found in the relationality and temporality of resistance, and that the radically different utopian place is the queer horizon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Handmaid’s Tale; Margaret Atwood; Donna Haraway; Karen Barad; José Esteban Muñoz; utopia; dystopia; entanglement; diffraction; disidentification; gender studies; queer theory; intersectionality; narratology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>