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GILEAD AND THE THREAT OF THE SINTHOMOSEXUAL: A QUEER READING OF SERENA AND JUNE'S DYNAMIC IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* (2017)

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Abstract

Lee Edelman's queer psychoanalytic literary criticism has greatly influenced the field of queer studies and the queer reading of different types of texts. His theories on reproductive futurism and sinthomosexuality have been a source of debate amongst scholars and have given a new perspective on the way academic and non-academic queer people view the American politic landscape of the 2000's, as well as the position that the figure of the Child occupies in the literary and audiovisual production of Western societies. His arguments on the opposite nature of the sinthomosexual, symbol of the death drive and represented in society as the homosexual, and the metaphorical Child, the representation of an unachievable future and a stable identity, open the door for a nuanced and complex analysis of many texts beyond those he himself presents in his 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* His focus on queering cisgender male characters, though, offers an interesting opportunity for the analysis of texts that may focus more heavily on the experiences of women, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*. Known for its impact on the literary landscape of the 80's, in addition to its influence on modern day feminist movements, Margaret Atwood's novel and its many adaptations have been extensively analysed by many scholars and through the view of many academic fields, as well as being criticized for its inclination towards white feminism and a lack of intersectionality. In this dissertation, thus, I will apply Edelman's theories of reproductive futurism and sinthomosexuality, alongside Luce Irigaray's feminist arguments on sexual rapport and sexual difference, to the 2017 audiovisual adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, aiming to present the idea that sinthomosexuality's danger to reproductive futurism resides in its ability to expand beyond one single character within a narrative, and I will do so by analysing June Osborne and Serena Joy's complex dynamic throughout the seasons of the series.

Key Words: Sinthomosexuality, reproductive futurism, the Child, sexual rapport, affinity, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead, Serena, June.

Resum

La crítica literària *queer* i psicoanalítica de Lee Edelman ha influenciat en gran mesura l'àrea d'estudis *queer* i la lectura *queer* de diferents tipus de textos. Les seues teories sobre el futurisme reproductiu i la sinthomosexualitat han sigut font de debat entre acadèmics i han oferit una nova perspectiva amb la qual la gent *queer*, tant acadèmica com no acadèmica, enfoca la política estatunidenca dels 2000, a més de la importància que les produccions literàries i audiovisuals de la societat occidental posen sobre la figura del Xiquet. Els seus arguments sobre la natura dicotòmica del sinthomosexual, que representa la pulsió de mort i s'exemplifica socialment com l'homosexual, i el Xiquet metafòric, el qual simbolitza un futur e identitat estable inassolibles, ofereixen una anàlisis matitzada i complexa d'una varietat extensa de textos més enllà dels que ell mateix presenta en el seu llibre *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Tanmateix, el seu enfocament en la interpretació *queer* de personatges masculins cisgénere oferix un nínxol per a l'anàlisi de textos que puga enfocar-se més en les experiències de les dones, com *El conte de la Serventa*. Coneguda pel seu impacte al món literari dels 80 i la seua influència en el moviment feminista actual, tant la novel·la de Margaret Atwood com les seues diverses adaptacions han sigut analitzades profundament per una gran varietat d'acadèmics i camps d'estudi, a més de criticades per la seua inclinació cap a un feminisme blanc i la seua carència d'interseccionalitat. En aquest treball, doncs, aplicaré les teories de futurisme reproductiu i sinthomosexualitat de Edelman juntament amb els arguments feministes de Luce Irigaray sobre la diferència sexual i la relació sexual a l'adaptació audiovisual de *El conte de la Serventa* de 2017. L'objectiu serà presentar l'argument que l'amenaça que presenta la sinthomosexualitat al futurisme reproductiu resideix en la seua habilitat d'expandir-se més enllà d'un sol personatge dintre d'una narrativa, i oferiré com a mostra una anàlisi de la complexa dinàmica que es desenvolupa entre els personatges de June Osborne i Serena Joy al llarg de les temporades de la sèrie.

Paraules clau: sinthomosexualitat, futurisme reproductiu, el Xiquet, relació sexual, afinitat, El conte de la Serventa, Gilead, Serena, June.

Resumen

La crítica literaria *queer* y psicoanalítica de Lee Edelman ha influenciado en gran medida el área de estudios *queer* y la lectura *queer* de diferentes tipos de textos. Sus teorías sobre el futurismo reproductivo y la sinthomosexualidad han sido fuente de debate entre académicos y han ofrecido una nueva perspectiva con la que gente *queer*, tanto académica como no académica, enfoca la política estadounidense de los 2000, además de la importancia que las producciones literarias y audiovisuales de la sociedad occidental ponen sobre la figura del Niño. Sus argumentos sobre la naturaleza dicotómica del sinthomosexual, que representa la pulsión de muerte y se ejemplifica socialmente como el homosexual, y el Niño metafórico, el cual simboliza un futuro e identidad estable inalcanzables, ofrecen un análisis matizado y complejo de una variedad extensa de textos más allá de los que él mismo presenta en su libro *No al futuro: La teoría queer y la pulsión de muerte.* Sin embargo, su enfoque en la interpretación *queer* de personajes masculinos cisgénero ofrece un nicho para el análisis de textos que pueda enfocarse más en las experiencias de las mujeres, como *El cuento de la criada.* Conocida por su impacto en el mundo literario de los 80 y su influencia en el movimiento feminista actual, tanto la novela de Margaret Atwood como sus muchas adaptaciones se han analizado profundamente por una gran variedad de académicos y campos de estudio, así como criticado por su inclinación hacia un feminismo blanco y su carencia de interseccionalidad. En este trabajo, pues, aplicaré las teorías de futurismo reproductivo y sinthomosexualidad de Edelman junto a los argumentos feministas de Luce Irigaray sobre la diferencia sexual y la relación sexual a la adaptación audiovisual de *El cuento de la criada* de 2017. El objetivo será presentar el argumento de que la amenaza que presenta la sinthomosexualidad al futurismo reproductivo reside en su habilidad de expandirse más allá de un solo personaje dentro de una narrativa, y ofreceré como muestra

un análisis de la compleja dinámica que se desarrolla entre los personajes de June Osborne y Serena Joy a través de las temporadas de la serie.

Palabras clave: sinthomosexualidad, futurismo reproductivo, el Niño, relación sexual, afinidad, *El cuento de la criada*, Gilead, Serena, June.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

> "There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another" (Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* 135).

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* narrates the life of Offred, an enslaved woman held captive in a theological regime, Gilead, set in former United States, forced to bear children for the Commanders of Gilead's government. *The Handmaid's Tale*'s original text, a modern classic, and its variety of adaptations have been the source of many studies and many interpretations, and its themes of reproduction, power, and language have been thoroughly analysed. Expanding on the original text, the 2017 Hulu audiovisual adaptation builds upon the instances of affinity and allyship amongst women within Gilead, and presents Offred/June as more than a narrator, but as the hero of the story and the enemy to Gilead's regime. Tackling Gilead's obsession with children and reproduction, June's fight against oppression leads her to establish several relationships with those who clearly break Gilead's rules, and those who may be more reluctant to do so.

The topic of reproduction and futurism, as well as its correlation to queer theory, is one of the main themes in Edelman's *No Future.* From a psychoanalytic perspective, Edelman approaches society's obsession with reproduction and the Child as the representative figure of the future, as well as the role of the homosexual as what he coins the sinthomosexual, he whom threatens the fantasy of the Child and reproductive futurism by evidencing the meaninglessness behind it. By closely analysing several texts from different kinds of media, Edelman theorizes on the need for the queer movement to reject politics (both liberal and conservative), as they exclusively work towards the fantasy of the future, and embrace its role as the dismantler of the Symbolic order of reproductive futurism.

The main thesis of this dissertation will be, then, an analysis of the 2017 audiovisual adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* through the theory of reproductive futurism as stated by Lee Edelman in his 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Reproductive futurism will be exemplified by comparing its characteristics with *The Handmaid's Tale*'s setting, Gilead, and its catachrestic nature, will be explored by developing the character of Serena Joy Waterford. Edelman's sinthomosexual will be parallelled to June Osborne, the main protagonist of the adaptation. Finally, I will argue that the sinthomosexual, as Edelman introduces it, is not only tied to a single character, but its threat to reproductive futurism resides in its ability to expand beyond itself and create ties that offer the opportunity for other characters to embrace their own sinthomosexuality, especially among same-sex dynamics that are capable of exploiting the affinity they find amongst themselves.

1.1. The Handmaid's Tale *and Its Adaptation*

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel written by Margaret Atwood and published in 1985 in Canada. The near-future dystopic novel, set in Gilead (former United States), exploits a diary-like format in the shape of transcribed cassettes (Atwood 309), in which Offred, the main narrator, attempts to put down her thoughts as a captive fertile woman who is forced to carry and bear children for the Commanders of the regime. Atwood's text received several prizes ('1986 L.A. Times'; 'GGBooks'; 'Arthur C. Clarke') and has been object of study in schools and universities (Bergmann 854; Burack 275; Laz 55).

The Handmaid's Tale's adaptation into audiovisual media was ordered by the streaming service Hulu and adapted by Bruce Miller under the production of, amongst others, MGM Television. Spanning five seasons, with a sixth on its way, the adaptation began airing in 2017 and, after some hiccups due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the SAG-AFTRA strikes of 2023 (Andreeva; Petski), it is predicted to end in 2025. The series has been classified amongst the best 100 shows of the 21st century by both The Guardian (Abbott, et al.) and the BBC (BBC

Culture), and has been granted several Emmy awards for, amongst others, Outstanding Writing, Outstanding Lead Actress, and Outstanding Drama Series ("The Handmaid's Tale").

The audiovisual adaptation diverges from the novel by expanding significantly upon the premises set in the text. While the first season is taken directly from the book, the following four seasons (and counting) develops June's storyline and Gilead's world further and further, with Atwood's assistance (Dingfelder). This offers a nuance in the progression of the characters beyond what the novel set for them originally, precipitating into complex character dynamics, such as those of June and Serena's. Yvonne Strahovski (Serena) and Elizabeth Moss (June) have been able to bring to life a complex relationship throughout the five seasons of the series, a "complicated and intimate" (Strause) push and pull that offers a fertile ground for exploration and analysis through many lenses.

1.2. The Handmaid's Tale *Among Scholars: An Overview*

Atwood's works, and especially *The Handmaid's Tale*, have had wide academic reception since she began writing in 1961. Many books and essays have been published in relation to Atwood, including a Cambridge Companion edited by Coral Ann Howells and published in 2006. *The Handmaid's Tale* specifically has several study guides, including one by Gina Wisker published by Bloomsbury in 2010, and its reception amongst fields such as feminist and gender studies, utopian and dystopian fiction or adaptation studies has been extensive.

Despite Atwood's insistence on her novel not being a "feminist dystopia" ("The Handmaid's Tale in Context" 516), the impact it has made on the political and academic landscape within gender studies, especially in USA, is undeniable. Shirley Neuman's essay "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*" analyses the text through its contextual background, the year it was written in (1984) and how "both totalitarianism and those who hoped to retrench some of the gains of feminism had made significant inroads on the successes of the 1970s" (Neuman 859), developing its nature as a

cautionary tale (866). Sandra Tomc's 1993 essay argues in favour of pulling away from the "liberal/left feminist framework" of reading (84) to view the parallelisms between Canadian nationalism in regards to United States and Gilead's invasion and control of women's bodies. The reception of both the novel and, especially, the adaptation to audiovisual media have had repercussions in the feminist political landscape, sparking protests in defence of women's reproductive rights with the theme of the series and novel (Upadhye and The NYT Company).

The dystopian themes of the text have also been thoroughly analysed alongside its feminist perspective. Elisabeth Hansot's 1994 essay elaborates on storytelling as an act of resistance in Gilead's dystopic landscape, as well as the ambiguity of Offred's audience and the fragmentation of her narration (67). Karma Waltonen edited a 2015 collection of essays, *Margaret Atwood's Apocalypses*, where several authors explored the dystopic concept of apocalypse within Atwood's works. Stein parallels, for example, *The Handmaid's Tale* with the cultural figure of Scheherazade, arguing that Offred is a "Scheherazade of the future, telling her story to save her life" (269) within the dystopic world of Gilead.

The many adaptations of the novel have been exploited in several ways: not only the audiovisual adaptation to series, which will be analysed in this work, but the 1990's film directed by Volker Schlöndorff, the graphic novel adapted by Renee Nault or the opera by Poul Ruders and Paul Bentley. Wells-Lassagne and McMahon edited in 2021 a collection of essays exploring the many aspects of the adaptations of Atwood's works called *Adapting Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale and Beyond.* The intersectional aspects (or lack-there-of) within the adaptations and the original text have been qualitatively analysed by Ju Oak Kim's "Intersectionality in Quality Feminist Television: Rethinking Women's Solidarity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Big Little Lies"*, which focuses on the way the exclusion of minority groups of women is heavily simplified. The many adaptations of the text, as well as its relevance in the sociopolitical landscape of United States, have been analysed through the perspective of

their unified theme of resistant female voices by Amanda Howell's essay "Breaking Silence, Bearing Witness, and Voicing Defiance: The Resistant Female Voice in the Transmedia Storyworld of *The Handmaid's Tale*".

Lacanian psychoanalysis has also been applied to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Joodaki and Jafari have analysed how the Symbolic orders within the text, that is, those created by Offred and Professor Pieixioto, are able to exemplify Žižek's definition of anamorphosis as something that only gains meaning when viewed from a different perspective, the same way that some elements within Offred's narration gain meaning when seen from Pieixioto's future angle [SIC] (15). Montelaro's "Maternity and the Ideology of Sexual Difference in *The Handmaid's Tale*" reads the novel from the perspective of Irigaray's theory on psychoanalytical sexual difference, which will be explained further in the analysis, relating it specifically to the maternal role of female characters within the text (235). Montelaro exploits Atwood's magnification of "many social aspects of patriarchy which allude to the possibility of a feminine erotics outside the masculine imaginary" (238) to present Gilead as the example of Freudian patriarchal sexuality as otherness of the same, that is, as desire within self-reflection. She argues that the patriarchal view of the reproductive-maternal function of women is divided amongst the Handmaids, the Wives and the Marthas, the first two fulfilling the role of reproduction, the last the role of maternity by taking care of the home and the family, all "completely exclude[ing] the possibility of a genuinely feminine erotics. Instead, women in The Handmaid's Tale become victims of masculine eroticization" (245).

In regards to the topic of this dissertation, that is, queer studies, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been briefly explored from a queer angle, mostly as a critique to its white and straight-centred themes. As stated by Karen Crawley, the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a "post-racial aesthetic, which invites the audience to enter into a way of seeing that is 'colourblind'" (342), as well as a perspective on pre-Gilead culture that is open about queerness,

which “feeds into the Anglo-American liberal understanding of itself as being post-discrimination (the idea that gay marriage was the last bastion of oppression to full freedom from homophobic legal structures for instance)” (349). By doing this, she argues that “*The Handmaid’s Tale* prioritises a particular strand of feminist critique that assumes all women suffer equally under patriarchal systems” (351), ignoring years of black and lesbian feminist scholarship. Crawley encourages a resistant reading by focusing on Moira, a black queer woman, rather than June, to evidence the inability liberalism has to engage and properly represent history and politics of race, as well as to call awareness to “how historical race and gender configurations are reproduced, and contribute significantly, to the shape of current attempts to find justice” (354).

Jonathan Alexander and Sherryl Vint expose how *The Hanmdiad’s Tale* adaptation would benefit from a larger perspective. They criticise the colourblind and “sexuality-blind” focus of the text in a similar way to Crawley, in the sense that, despite constantly suffering violence, “any particularity of their experience of such abuse due to their different identities is largely left untold” (27). In Gilead, race, sexual and class differences “are largely elided in favor of biological gender essentialism” (28). The text, they propose, would profit largely from imagining “sociality and reproduction through queer and Indigenous rather than heteronormative logics” (30), which limits the emphasis on rage and revenge that *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s adaptation works with.

In addition, the series’ representation of queer people as the representation of the ““freedom” and “democracy” left behind in the collapse of the United States” (Alexander and Vint 30) is defined as a kind of “homonationalism”: “a deployment of sexual identity tolerance that serves as a kind of “virtual signaling” while essentially erasing racial histories of sexual and sexualized violence and oppression” (30). All in all, they nod to the non-monogamous relationship of June-Luke-Nick within the show as a step forward towards the deconstruction

of hegemonic ideals both in and out of Gilead, and argue that "the queerest approach to the Anthropocene of *The Handmaid's Tale* might focus less on the fate of people with particular identities and far more on questioning wide-held cultural assumptions about the necessity of family and human reproduction and how such assumptions support the rise of fascism" (31).

Regarding queer psychoanalytic theory and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Edelman's work has been mentioned in a couple of theses presented in the past years. Marlijn Hochstenbach uses Edelman's reproductive futurism to demonstrate that "the biopolitical logics of reproductive futurism are inherent in modern democracy" (2) through a comparative analysis of both *The Handmaid's Tale*'s novel and Alphonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*. On the other hand, Annette Lapointe, Canadian author, threads Edelman's *sinthom*osexual through her analysis of the technologies of femininity and reproductivity, where Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*'s use of images such as "woman-as-uterus, penetrative scrutiny, and malevolent infection" (56) is mimicked by analogue technology within the text.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and its various adaptations has been a source of thorough analysis and interpretation, as many of Atwood's texts, queer and psychoanalytic analysis, as seen, has not been at the centre of these discussions. Most of the psychoanalytic analysis of the text pushes aside queer interpretation, and queer analyses of the text have heavily focused on a well-deserved criticism of the white and cis-straight centred perspective of both the novel and the 2017 series. Queer readings of the text, including those from a psychoanalytic perspective, have not gone further from the actual, textual representation of queer characters, focusing mostly and solely on Moira, Emily and, very briefly, their partners.

It is here, then, that I wish to turn the focus onto the subtextual representation of queerness that can be found within *The Handmaid's Tale,* and, more importantly, the way in which this perspective represents the threat that queerness means to hegemonic orders as an underlying and potentially expansive danger to the discriminatory practices of society towards

those who may evidence the meaninglessness of such discrimination. For this, as previously mentioned, I will analyse *The Handmaid's Tale* adaptation through Edelman's theories of reproductive futurism and sinthomosexual, as well as Irigaray's view of sexual difference, to defend the idea that queerness' threat to the Symbolic order lies in its potential to expand beyond itself.

2. Theoretical Framework

Queer studies was born as an interdisciplinary field of research between the 1980's and the 1990's across English departments in several universities of the United States, due, mostly, to the academic turn towards representation and visibility of marginalized identities within society. Heavily politicized, it emerged from within Lesbian and Gay studies and evolved away from its categorical nature to embrace a more fluid, anti-identitarian premise that has become integral to its focus (Talburt 96). True to its literary origins, queer literary criticism (also known as queer reading or queering), has been one of the main branches of queer studies since its conception, but what do queer readings actually *read*? What is considered, within the field, *a queer text?*

2.1. What is a Queer Reading?

Many scholars have approached this question from a variety of angles, but perhaps one of the most influential authors to broach the topic has been Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Defining the queer in queer studies as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8), Sedgwick leaned towards a fluid definition that avoided the narrowing down of elements that might characterize a text as queer.

Quite the opposite, in fact, as she defended in the opening lines of her most influential work: "[M]any of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western

culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (*Epistemology* 1). This crisis, risen with the coinage of "homosexual" as an identity and essence, roots itself in the lack of visible marks by which to differentiate the cisgender, heterosexual man (the unmarked category by default) from the cisgender, homosexual man (the marked, "unnatural", Other), contrary to how, when born, one is assigned as either female or male by "visibly clear"[1] physical attributes (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 2; Edelman *Homographesis* 12). Because of this, Sedgwick argued that "virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must … incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (*Epistemology* 1), successfully establishing that a queer text can be *any text created in Western society after the 19th century*, if looked at from the right angle.

This poses a significant question: Which angle are we looking from to find queer elements within a text? What makes a reader identify a character or a narrative arc within a text as queer? This concern is the main topic of Edelman's introduction to *Homographesis*, where he addresses a similar enquiry: "How, they seemed to ask, can literary criticism see or recognize "the homosexual" in order to bring "homosexuality" into theoretical view?" (*Homographesis* 3). While this eagerness to classify is related to "a liberationist politics committed to the social necessity of opening, or even removing, the closet door" (3), it is presented by Edelman as dangerously similar to the aforementioned homophobic urge to identify "the queer" in some visible and unmistakable way. Historically, hegemonic society has connected queerness (and, specifically, male homosexuality, which is Edelman's focus) to certain behaviours, or "signifying practices", and queer bodies have been viewed "as inherently textual—as bodies that might well bear a "hallmark" that could, and must, be read" (*Homographesis* 6). Edelman argues that this insistence on reading the queer body, of making its Otherness essential and

[1] Sweeping under the rug here, as hegemonic society tends to do, the existence of intersex people whose physical attributes may not be as "clear."

visible by pointing out specific behaviours, confirms the futility of attempting to identify said behaviours with queerness at all, and he does so through the concept of "homographesis".

Homographesis, as Edelman states, names two separate actions: First, "a normalizing practice of cultural discrimination" (10), that is, the aforementioned categorizing of "signifying practices" as queer in an attempt to mark the queer body and thus create a visible difference between straight men and gay men[2] that could not be identifiable otherwise. And second, the "strategic resistance to that reification of sexual difference" (10), that is, the evidencing of those "signifying practices" as contextual and not inherent, and thus useless as irrefutable markers of queerness.

Edelman uses Lacan's definitions of metaphor and metonymy to explain the two functions of homographesis, connecting metaphor with the first and metonymy with the second. To put it simply, metaphor, as substitution, essentializes queerness to specific behaviours or practices and equates them to its identity, making the reading of the queer body possible because these behaviours (such as femininity in men, for example) are considered inherent to queer identity (11-13). Metonymy, on the other hand, is contextual, it displaces (or, as I like to see it, concatenates, spreads out) the meaning of these behaviours in a chain of signifiers that must be seen as a whole to gain some sense (13-14). Edelman exemplifies metonymy through several homographs, such as "bear", which can signify both the animal or the action of carrying (13), and whose meaning can only be understood in context, in the same way that behaviours must be seen in connection with other elements to assess their possible relation to queerness. It is to this sameness in the homographic example that the second meaning of homographesis calls attention to, as if saying "if I, the queer, am visibly different, why do we look the same? Why are my behaviours categorized as inherently queer?", refusing, as Edelman puts it, "the specifications of identity (including sexual identity) performed by the cultural practice of a

[2] More specifically, cisgender straight men and cisgender gay men.

regulatory homographesis that marks out the very space within which to think "homosexuality" itself" (*Homographesis* 14).

Thus, when searching for specific elements that could identify a character, a narrative arc or a setting as queer, we must bear in mind that queerness within a text is not essential, but contextual. We read it as such not because the text *per se* is queer or a character is essentially queer, but because we contextualize the character's traits and connect them to that which we have been told, historically, is queer. Or, better even, that which relates to our own queerness.

Sedgwick theorized over this kind of reading, what she named "reparative reading", in contraposition to a "paranoid reader." For her, the key difference between a reparative and a paranoid reading, was that the reparatively positioned reader sees it "realistic and necessary to experience surprise" ('Paranoid reading' 24). A paranoid reader is in search of the "proof" that will "out" the "truth" within the text ('Paranoid reading' 18-20), while the reparative reader is in search of complicity, of that which may connect to themselves and their experiences, of those surprises within a text that might call back to their own lives. Sedgwick further explained this by hypothesizing a predisposition to queer readings found in the reader's own circumstances:

> [A presiding image is] the interpretative absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (*yet?*) have resolved into a sexual specificity or proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child … is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may offer an answer. The model of such reading is … a much more speculative, superstitious, and methodologically adventurous state where recognitions, pleasures, and discoveries seep in only from the most stretched and ragged edges of one's competence ('Paranoid reading' 2-3, original emphasis).

This presents the queer reader (and, specifically, the *queer* queer reader) with the conundrum of wishing to analyse texts from a complicit perspective, but by doing so, presenting the categorical and essentializing view of queerness as legible. This idea of legible queer bodies, although rooted mostly in homophobia and the wish to "mark" the other as visible, offers access to "a powerful instrument through which to constitute and mobilize "communal" energies" (Edelman *Homographesis* 22), a chance to see ourselves in others and bond.

Thus, tempting as it may be to pick one side (to categorize queerness metaphorically, that is, essentially) or the other (to see queerness as purely metonymic, contextual and complicit), we must bear in mind that polar oppositions such as these "[reproduce] the essentializing binarism subtending the logic of identity and informing the "metaphorical model" of reading" (Edelman *Homographesis* 22). Rather than aligning ourselves with "the misrecognitions through which the hetero/homo antithesis shapes our world" (Edelman *Homographesis* 22), we should exploit our positions as "[subjects] who can only speak from within the coils of those ideological misrecognitions" (Edelman *Homographesis* 22) to offer the nuanced analysis and deconstruction of our Western cultural texts needed to expose the intricate net of repressive ideologies that tie our society together.

2.2. Edelman's Reproductive Futurism

One of those repressive ideologies could be what Edelman has coined as "reproductive futurism", the terms of which "impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (*No Future* 2). To put it in other words, Edelman's thesis argues that reproductive futurism makes it impossible for queerness to be a part of the political

landscape, regardless of the inclination, as queerness opposes that which is central to politics: a drive towards the future.

To begin breaking this down, Edelman theorizes through Lacanian psychoanalysis that politics, independently of them being conservative or liberal, always work towards an unattainable future. He argues that the subject, as signifier, can only aim for a "*promissory* identity" (*No Future* 8, original emphasis), since the signifier can never truly represent that which it signifies. Because of this, politics "names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history" (*No Future* 8). In other words, it "promises" an unreal future, an "end", in which the subject's identity could be complete, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulty to attain it. In true psychoanalytic fashion, Edelman argues that this identity, this fulfilment, is something the order of the Symbolic (a set of systematically organized meanings that help shape our vision of the world)[3] believes it once had and has lost, and thus must work towards its recovery (*No Future* 9).

It is through narrativity, Edelman explains, that politics externalizes desire in order to sequentialize and represent the drives, those subconscious impulses towards the fulfilment of identity that are known to disarticulate that same narrativity:

> Politics, that is, by externalizing and configuring in the fictive form of a narrative, allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely as desire, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire: the drives (*No Future* 9).

Those political narratives hold at their core, always, the image of the Child, who "[embodies] for us the telos of the social order and [has] come to be seen as the one for whom

[3] By the way Edelman uses the Symbolic order in *No Future*, he seems to closely equate it to society, in the sense that society tends to share a view of the world rooted in similar definitions to different elements.

that order is held in perpetual trust" (*No Future* 11). The image of the Child (or the Child with capital C, as I will refer to it from now on), has been analysed by Edelman in several texts, and he has defined it as a combination of genetic survivability and ideological inheritance:

> At the crossing of *überleben* and *fortleben*[4], then, those genetic materials, which precipitate the child, constitute the site where residual trace and the thing itself coincide, where the very inscription of what's dead throbs with life and life takes its cue from a code … Because such genetic "living on" can offer, by itself, no assurance of survival in and as cultural memory, the child as biological survivor (*fortleben*) requires an educational supplement to make its survival equivalent to a book (*überleben*) ("Against Survival" 152-153).

The Child, thus, represents that fantasy of the future by embodying both the continuation of its parents' genetic material and their ideological principals through the education they bestow upon him. In addition, the Child symbolizes "the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ''real'' citizens are allowed" (*No Future* 11). The social order's objective, then, is to protect the future freedom of the Child, a freedom "more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself" (*No Future* 11), because it represents a step closer to the horizon of fulfilled, stabilized identity that political narratives work towards. This is emphasized by Edelman's notion that the Child, innocent as it is, is desire-less, "unmarked by the adult's adulterating implication in desire itself: the Child … made to image, for the satisfaction of adults, an Imaginary fullness that's considered to want … nothing" (*No Future* 21). Consequently, if the Symbolic's desire is that of a stable and fulfilled identity, and the Child is seen as that which does not desire, it represents,

[4] Edelman quotes Derrida's distinction between *überleben* as "to survive death as a book can survive the death of its author or a child the death of its parents", and *fortleben* as "*living on*, to continue to live" (qtd. in "Against Survival" 151, original emphasis).

then, *that* stability of identity, *that* unattainable future we greedily crave and constantly postpone upon the next generation as we ourselves realize we cannot reach it.

What role, then, does queerness play within this setting? Why is queerness cast out of the landscape of politics and, by extension, of society? To explain this, we must cast our eyes back to Edelman's theory of homographesis. As stated in that section of the text, the first function of homographesis (the metaphorical function) wishes to categorically define sexuality (specifically, homosexuality), while the second function (the metonymical function) evidences the resistance of queerness to that categorization, to that *fixation* of identity. This is also applied to Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism: The Child's want-less nature, its fixated and stable identity, as well as the Symbolic's obsession to achieve that stability, find themselves threatened by the resistance to stabilization that queer identities represent.

The Child, as Edelman puts it, "marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (*No Future* 21). Heteronormativity[5] and its obsession with sameness, repeats over and over again the same actions in its narrative towards the future, in lieu of fixating identity, of categorizing it. Those repetitions, or *drives*, represented through the Child and excused by it, find themselves exposed and disarticulated when encountered with the instability of queerness, with its acknowledgment that fixation is impossible, "its resistance to determination of meaning, … and, above all, its rejection of spiritualization through marriage to reproductive futurism" (*No Future* 27). In other words, the Child, both symbol of the future and excuse to hide society's compulsive *drive* to the repetitive act of reproduction towards a fixated identity, must "be protected" from the Queer[6]. The Queer evidences the meaninglessness of that drive through the acknowledgment that identity cannot be fixed, thus

[5] More specifically, cisheteronormativity. Edelman's texts do not delve in, to my knowledge, trans identities, and focus mostly on sexuality and sexual identities. To avoid repetition, consider the use of heterosexual/heteronormativity as equivalent to cisheteronormativity.
[6] Here I capitalize the Queer to evidence its role as counterpart to the Child.

rendering reproductive futurism aimless and threatening exposure of what truly hides behind it: the death drive.

2.3. Sinthomosexuality and the Antisocial Queer

Edelman's figure of the sinthomosexual aligns itself with what scholars have named the Antisocial Thesis within queer theory, a train of political thought first presented in Leo Bersani's *Homos*. In his 1995 book, Bersani offers the idea that "[p]erhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality" (7), an anti-relational premise that theorizes on the subversive nature of queerness[7] as a changing force due to its inability to fit within normative society. By outright asking "[s]hould a homosexual be a good citizen?" (113), he elaborates that useful thought "may be created by questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service" (113).

In a similar way to what Edelman concludes in *No Future*, Bersani sees the potential in disregarding assimilation to heteronormative society and embracing an anti-social perspective that may offer the opportunity to expose and de-tangle the net of oppressions that assault anyone under the label of "Other". In addition, and on a more hopeful note when compared to Edelman, anti-sociality regarding heteronormativity could lead to a sociality amongst queers where the weight of those oppressions is, if not lifted, alleviated. Antisociality, thus, "could lead to a redefinition of community itself, one that would be considerably less indebted than we now are to the communal virtues elaborated by those who want us to disappear" (Bersani 131)[8].

Edelman introduces his own version of the anti-social in the figure of the sinthomosexual, who asserts "itself … against futurity, against its propagation" (*No Future* 33).

[7] Although he focuses specifically on male homosexuality.

[8] It must be mentioned, as José Esteban Muñoz does, that antirelational queer theories usually focus on white cisgender gay men and tend to ignore the nuances that arise when other intersecting identities are present (Caserio et al 825). While cis gay white men may be able to imagine a community isolated from heterosexuality, other groups of people, such people of colour, may find it harder to "leave behind" those with whom they share oppressions unrelated to their sexuality.

The sinthomosexual is, for Edelman, the embodiment of the death drive and, at the same time, its evidence. Taking from Lacanian psychoanalysis[9], Edelman presents the death drive as "the name for a force of mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess supersedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed, the death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal" (*No Future* 22). In other words, the death drive is a constant impulse that has no true goal aside from the production of "formal excess", also known as *jouissance* or enjoyment. Any "goal" towards which we may believe the drive is pushing us is just a placeholder "that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds" (22), and if that "goal" is reached, no satisfaction is drawn from it. The death drive is, then, pleasure for pleasure's sake, a constant impulse towards an imaginary end that, unless supressed or controlled, can derive in negative consequences. A basic example could be eating until you are sick.

The sinthome, then is seen "[a]s the template of a given subject's distinctive access to jouissance, defining the condition of which the subject is always a symptom of sorts itself, the sinthome, in its refusal of meaning, procures the determining relation to enjoyment by which the subject finds itself driven beyond the logic of fantasy or desire" (*No Future* 35). In other words, the sinthome is every subject's "starting point" from which the death drive moves from. It is the excuse behind which the death drive hides so the subject may acquire that enjoyment. Following the previous example, the sinthome is the "hunger" that drives the subject to eat until they retch.

How does Edelman reach, then, the concept of sinthomosexual? As he explains, the sinthome "brings the subject into being at the cost of a necessary blindness to this determination by the sinthome – a blindness to the arbitrary fixation of enjoyment responsible for its consistency" (*No Future* 36). In other words, the sinthome gives the subject a purpose by

[9] Edelman follows Jaques Lacan's psychoanalysis, whose theory is based on Sigmund Freud's body of work.

offering a *want*, but does not allow for the subject to be aware of the random nature of that want. The subject interprets this drive towards the *want* as essentializing identity instead of arbitrariness, an identity that "names its relation to an Other whose positivity seems to guarantee Symbolic reality itself" (*No Future* 37). That is, the subject believes that this relation to an existing Other (in this case the Child) promises a Symbolic reality, a tangible truth (in this case, a future where identity is seamless and constant).

It is here where we can say that this subject ""believes in" its sinthome" (*No Future* 37), instead of identifying with it, which is "the defining mark of futurism, inscribing the faith that temporal duration will result in the realization of meaning by way of a "final signifier" that will make meaning whole at last" (*No Future* 37). In other words, by believing in the sinthome, the subject falls into a doctrine-like faith that promises an ending, long into the future, where meaning becomes whole. To put it in a more simple way: Society's death drive, hidden behind the sinthome of its want for stable identity, puts all its eggs into the basket of the Child (who symbolizes this stable identity) and venerates it as that which, in the horizon of history, will bring this stable identity (and enjoyment) to all.

Sinthomosexuality, then, "scorns such belief in a final signifier, reducing every signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense, on identification with one's sinthome instead of belief in its meaning" (*No Future* 37). In layman terms, Edelman argues that sinthomosexuality rejects this postponement of enjoyment and calls out the arbitrary-ness of the sinthome, *identifying* with it (that is, embodying it) instead of *believing* in it (venerating it as if it will save us all). The sinthomosexual, thus, ruins everyone's party by evidencing the emptiness behind the fantasy that the Child will bring completeness and enjoyment in the future, and reclaims the right to enjoy themselves *now,* to embrace the death drive without hiding it behind a sinthome, but to make the sinthome itself the source of enjoyment.

Edelman argues that the Queer is the best representation of the sinthomosexual we may find in our society. He states that "homosexuality, understood as a cultural figure, as the hypostatization of various fantasies that trench on the antisocial force that queerness might better name, is made—that is, both called forth and compelled—to carry the burden of sexuality's demeaning relation to the sinthome" (*No Future* 39). In other words, he defends that the image that comes to mind when sexuality is mentioned in relation to the sinthome is the cultural image of queerness as representation of debauchery. Moreover, homosexuality, as representation of the "availability of an unthinkable jouissance" (Edelman *No Future* 39), is seen as a threat to the fantasy of reproductive futurism because it reduces the meaning behind the drive towards a stable identity to "the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive" (Edelman *No Future* 39), that is, it exposes the meaning behind the drive as actually meaningless enjoyment.

This meaninglessness, as well as homosexuality's "availability" to unrestricted jouissance, is seen as a risk that feeds into the social connection between queerness and "a fatal, and even murderous, jouissance – a fantasy that locates homosexuality in the place of the sinthome, constructing it always as what I call *sinthomo*sexuality" (Edelman *No Future* 39). I believe that, by locating homosexuality "in the place of the sinthome", Edelman means to explain that society views homosexuality as the *want*, as the "excuse" ("condition", even), that encourages the compulsion. The sinthomosexual, then, is the subject who is attracted to that *want*, who, instead of projecting into the future the eventual enjoyment of reaching that which it is driven to, it takes enjoyment from the drive itself, thus exposing the absurdity of postponing it and becoming a threat to the fantasy of reproductive futurism.

This connection between sinthomosexuality and queerness is even more emphasized when Edelman brings attention to how reproductive futurism excuses the enjoyment of its own

drive, that is, of its compulsion towards the future, by glossing over it with the justification of reproduction:

> [O]ur meaning is always a function not only of what we *do* with our genitals but also of what we *don't do*: a function, that is, of the envy-, contempt-, and anxiety-inducing fixation on our freedom from the necessity of translating the corrupt, unregenerate vulgate of fucking into the infinitely tonier, indeed sacramental, Latin of procreation (*No Future* 40, original emphasis).

For reproductive futurism to work there must be, redundantly, reproduction: sex. Sex, which is (usually) pleasurable, is connected to jouissance and enjoyment, and this enjoyment cannot be pleasure for the sake of pleasure alone, because then it would become meaningless. It must be given a meaning, that is, to work towards that future in which identity is fulfilled and stable, to *give birth to the Child*. Queerness[10] is left out of the possibility of excusing itself, as "[n]o fucking could ever effect such creation: all sensory experience, all pleasure of the flesh, must be borne away from this fantasy of futurity secured, eternity's plan fulfilled, as ''a new generation is carried forward"" (*No Future* 41).

It is in this way that society, through reproductive futurism, sets up the Queer as the "enemy", as the antisocial (in the sense that it presents itself against the established society) who must be rejected or redeemed to protect the fantasy built around the Child. To protect reproductive futurism, that is, from being exposed as just another sinthome that enables the death drive to extract enjoyment from the fantasy that, in the future, the stable and fulfilled identity which the Symbolic believes once had will be regained.

[10] Edelman here does not refer to the reality that queer people have children, either biologically or not, but to the social notion that queerness (cisgender male homosexuality specifically) is sterile, that is, it does not produce offspring. He disclaims at the beginning of *No Future* that being queer does not predispose someone to rank *against* reproductive futurism (17).

2.4. Sexual Difference and Sexual Rapport

As previously mentioned, Edelman argues that homosexuality is the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of "sexuality's demeaning relation to the sinthome" (*No Future* 39). This "demeaning relation" is, as he further explains, what Lacan describes as the "*absence* of sexual relation" (*No Future* 39, original emphasis), famously worded as "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel" (Lacan 134). Edelman elaborates that this "absence" is a lack of "complementarity to naturalize relations between the sexes insofar as all sexuality suffers the mark of the signifier as lack" (*No Future* 39). That is, the lack of affinity, of *rapport*, between women and men (due to the inability to understand each other because the signifier will always misrepresent the signified) evidences the fallacy of heterosexual relationships as the "natural" relationships.

This idea of a lack of affinity between men and women is developed by lacanian psychoanalyst and feminist theorist Luce Irigaray. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray argues that "female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (23). Not only that, but the entire concept of femininity has been formed in the Symbolic order (and in psychoanalysis) as the lesser, worse version of masculinity: "The "feminine" is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex" (Irigaray *This Sex* 69). If the feminine is always the "lesser" of the masculine, then "any theory of the 'subject' will have always been appropriated as 'masculine'" (Irigaray *Speculum* 133), that is, that everything created under the patriarchy has been created for the masculine, thus excluding women. This means, then, that real "sexual difference" has never been taken into account by the Symbolic, because there has not been any consideration for the feminine. In other words, there cannot be sexual difference if only one of the sexes[11] is taken into consideration for everything.

[11] This theory by Irigaray is, as well as outdated, heavily based on biological binary divisions of male and female bodies that do not align whatsoever with my personal beliefs. Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that her perspective on the exclusion of women from virtually everything built by the patriarchy was quite influential at the time of its inception.

Because women's sexuality (and anything relating to women, for that matter) has been conceptualized under masculine rule, women's knowledge of their own desire is not only unimportant to them, but usually lacking altogether: "if woman is asked to sustain, to revive, man's desire, the request neglects to spell out what it implies as to the value of her own desire. A desire of which she is not aware, moreover, at least not explicitly" (Irigaray *This Sex* 27). This not knowing implies a misalignment of sexual desires between men and women that must be overcome through indirect communication:

> [A] culture in which sexual relations are impracticable because man's desire and woman's are strangers to each other. And in which the two desires have to try to meet through indirect means, whether the archaic one of a sense-relation to the mother's body, or the present one of active or passive extension of the law of the father (Irigaray *This Sex* 27).

The "relations" in sexual relations must be interpreted, here, through its original French wording as uttered by Lacan: *rapport*. Taken from the French, the English version of the noun is defined as "mutual understanding between persons; sympathy, empathy, connection; a relationship characterized by these" ("Rapport"). It is this meaning that Edelman uses in his work when referring to "the *absence* of sexual relation" (*No Future* 39, original emphasis), to "the impossibility of sexual rapport or of ever being able to signify the relation between the sexes" (*No Future* 74). He argues that true understanding between a heterosexual couple is impossible, as men and women's desire will never align, and the attempts to "signify the relation", or "try to meet through indirect means", are just a smokescreen to hide the fact that heterosexual relationships are as "unnatural" as homosexual ones.

It is, as mentioned in the previous section, fundamental to reproductive futurism that this smokescreen stays put, where the Child is this "indirect mean", this "signifier", this

catachrestical element through which the heterosexual couple attempts to justify their sexual desire, always tied as it is to the drive. The sinthomosexual, then, becomes a threat to the social order by evidencing this needless excuse, by exposing the access to jouissance or enjoyment without the need of reproduction, and by pointing at the excuse of the Child as the feeble thread, easily cut, that holds the cisheteropatriarchal order of the Symbolic barely together.

3. Analysis

As laid out, Edelman's theory mainly focuses on queerness dismantling and airing out the complicated webs behind the Symbolic's structure, and he exemplifies this by delving into several works throughout his book. These works (*A Christmas Carol, Silas Marner, North by Northwest* (1959) and *The Birds* (1963)) are not characterized by being explicitly queer works, and the characters which Edelman works on (Scrooge, Silas Marner, Leonard and the birds themselves) are not defined by their sexuality or gender, but by their sinthomosexual nature. In this analysis, I wish to follow similar steps by breaking down the audiovisual adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* through Edelman's view, aiming specifically to exemplify sinthomosexuality's ability to expand itself beyond one single figure within a text.

To this end, the analysis will begin by taking Edelman's exploration of reproductive futurism within the society of United States previously explained and applying it to the dystopic, near-future society of Gilead (former United States). Secondly, June Osborne's character will be examined through the sinthomosexual lens, putting her forwards as the sinthomosexual that Edelman implies is present in every text, and comparing her with Serena Joy's character as the example of the complete opposite, that is, the ideal asset of reproductive futurism. Finally, I will argue that sinthomosexuality can proliferate and spread beyond one single character by evidencing what is already there, and I will do so by breaking down Serena and June's dynamic through the perspectives of sexual difference and sexual rapport established

by Irigaray and developed further by Edelman, and claiming their relationship as the biggest threat of reproductive futurism: the Queer.

3.1. "Children. What else is there to live for?": Gilead's Reproductive Futurism

The audiovisual adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale is set in a near-future dystopic North America, where a group of ultra-conservative Christians have taken over political power and have established a theocratical government, renaming the country as Gilead. Gilead's most characteristic aspect throughout the series is its control over cisgender women's bodies in favour of enhancing the dwindling natality rate that the planet is going through, as stated in the conversation held by June and Moira, her best friend, in one of the flashbacks of the first episode. Moira attempts to comfort June when she announces her pregnancy, "Don't worry. Don't worry, getting pregnant is the hard part, that's what they're saying", to which June answers "That's not all they're saying, though, you know? I know five women at work who've had miscarriages. Some of them were pretty far along" ("Offred" 46:56-47:10).

Gilead's entire political system, then, is built around reproductivity, and it takes Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism to an extreme. By creating a setting in which sterility is rampant and reproductivity is becoming more and more complicated, *The Handmaid's Tale* bestows upon the Child not only the role of genetic and ideological continuity, but of the survivability of the human race. Moreover, the stable and seamless identity represented by the Child is craved even further by the Symbolic order of Gilead due to its meaning not only of the identity *per se*, but the stability of not standing on the verge of extinction. Raising the stakes in such a way precipitates into a radicalization of the characteristics of reproductive futurism presented by Edelman that makes Gilead's Symbolic and social order a perfect example of his theory.

For a start, Edelman's argument that the Child's rights will come "always at the cost of limiting the rights ''real'' citizens are allowed" (*No Future* 11) is expressed in the series through

the enslavement of fertile cisgender women as Handmaids, who are assigned to the homes of men in power to bear and give birth to children. In order to do this, the Handmaid will engage in what the text calls "the Ceremony", an organized rape in which she will be held down by the Wife[12] while the husband inseminates her. As explained by Aunt Lydia, one of the older women in charge of educating and controlling the Handmaids: "Once a month, on fertile days, the Handmaid shall lie between the legs of the Commander's Wife. The two of you will become one flesh, one flower, waiting to be seeded" ("Nolite Te Basterdes Carborundorum" 12:50-13:12). Or, as Moira enquires more clearly: "… we [the Handmaids] will be having intercourse with the men between the Wife's legs" (13:50-13:56).

The Handmaids are not only forced to bear children, but they are beaten and mutilated if they refuse to obey without a complaint, as seen when one of them, Janine, rejects listening when they are first introduced into the Red Centre, a reformation camp of sorts ("Offred" 18:14-18:17); or when Serena, June's mistress, selects the handful of Handmaids that are mutilated to pull them aside before presenting the rest to an international audience ("A Woman's Place" 26:00-27:20). Gilead's control over the Handmaids does not stop at physical torture, and they do not shy away from collective psychological abuse when they deem it necessary, as seen at the beginning of the episode "June", where the Handmaids are taken to a fake mass hanging to scare them into obedience after a big group of them refuse stoning another Handmaid (2:35-10:35).

Gilead's overprotection of the Child is not only translated into fierce control over those who are able to give birth to said Child, but brutal punishment to those who may endanger it. By the end of the first episode, a Particicution, a type of execution carried out by Handmaids, takes place. The group of Handmaids, including June, brutally beat to death a man that is accused of raping a Handmaid and causing the death of her unborn baby: "This man raped a

[12] "Wife" with a capital W, as they are considered a social class within Gilead's Symbolic order.

Handmaid. She was pregnant. And the baby died" ("Offred" 42:56-43:10). In Gilead, the rights of an unborn Child, or better said, the rights of a theoretical Child, one that has not even been conceived, are fiercely defended and heavily prioritized over any other individual.

The reason why Gilead is able to get away with torture, abuse, and murder is because, as Edelman states, one is "only *permitted* one side" (*No Future* 2, original emphasis), that side being the side of the Child, of the future. Politics, and Gilead building upon the Symbolic order of pre-Gilead politics, makes it "unthinkable" (*No Future* 3) not to stand in the favour of that which the Child represents. Furthermore, due to the raised stakes that infertility brings along, the Child in Gilead's Symbolic order represents much more than a stable identity, much more, even, than the assurance of being saved from extinction. Gilead's Child is the representation of power and of freedom, and these meanings are gendered.

In the net of meanings that constitutes Gilead's Symbolic, that which Gilead is working towards that it believes it once had and lost (in other words, that which the Child represents) depends on the gender[13] of who is imagining that hypothetical Child. For men, and especially for Commanders (the political heads of Gilead) the Child represents power and status, a possibility of regaining that which they believe the "liberal" culture that stood before Gilead had taken away from them. This is seen throughout the series, but it is very clear when, in the third season, the Waterfords and June travel to Washington to meet Commander Winslow, an important political head in Gilead's structure. Here it is revealed that Commander Winslow has six children ("Household" 10:26-11:40), connecting, in quite a direct fashion, political power to number of descendants.

For lower classes of men, such as the Guardians (the agents who control that the rules in Gilead are being followed), it is marriage, and thus the future possibility of Children, that

[13] Gender in *The Handmaid's Tale* universe is an identity but, mostly, a social class. Thus, when referring to gender, I also refer to the social classes that are protagonists of the adaptation: Men (both Commanders and Guardians) and Women (Wives and Handmaids, mostly, as well as Marthas in a more secondary sense).

which indicates status, to the point that it is given as a "gift" from the state for good service. The second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* shows this by marrying Nick, one of those agents, to Eden, a young girl, through a collective ceremony:

> COMMANDER: Today we honour our most valiant Guardians. And we salute their victories on the field of battle and in the halls of our Divine Republic. We praise your service and we reward your sacrifice. "And the Lord God said: "It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmeet for him." And the rib, which the Lord God hath taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man. Unto the woman, He said "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." Do you accept this sacred duty?
>
> GUARDIANS: I do.
>
> NICK: I do. ("Seeds" 21:20-23:33, fig. 1).

The Child representing power is also seen in the way in which other nations not only avoid attacking Gilead despite it overthrowing the US government, but go to the extent of making deals with it. As seen in "A Woman's Place", the Handmaids, those who have the ability to give birth to the Child, and thus, an extension of it, are no more than cattle for trade. Because of the worldwide fertility crisis, those who hold the most power are the ones who have a fighting chance to put forward the next generation, and thus, Gilead's control of fertile bodies and system of reproduction grants the nation something that other countries do not have: a future, and thus, the power to outlast:

> JUNE: What does it matter how many oranges we trade with Mexico?
>
> ALMA: You think they want to trade oranges? Don't be an idiot. Gilead only has one thing to trade that anyone wants. Red tags.

JUNE: What?

ALMA: They want to trade us, dummy. They want to trade for Handmaids (35:35-36:09).

For Handmaids, the Child represents freedom, not only in the literal sense of them being better taken care of and, thus, "more free" when they are pregnant or they have given birth, but also in the theoretical sense in which, from their own perspective, they hope to see their children live a freer life than they do, thus postponing their freedom onto their children. This freedom does not have to mean going back to the way life was before Gilead, but it is stated throughout the series that death is a kind of freedom for Handmaids. Exemplifying this, Janine, standing at the edge of a bridge about to jump off with her baby in her arms, turns to June, who is trying to stop her, and says: "Come with me. It can't hurt very much. No, just for a second. And then we'll be free." To which June responds, "I can't. I'm sorry. I can't because of my daughter" ("The Bridge" 38:43-39:17). By doing this, June postpones the freedom of death, her immediate jouissance, in favour of the future freedom of the daughter that Gilead took away from her.

From Gilead's perspective, the nation also believes that the embracing of their role as Handmaids has "freed" them from the "sinful" life they lived before, as stated by Aunt Lydia in one of the flashbacks of the first episode: "They were dirty women. They were sluts. But you are special girls. Fertility is a gift directly from God. He left you intact for a Biblical purpose. Like Bilhah served Rachel, you girls will serve the leaders of the Faithful and their barren Wives. You will bear children for them. Oh! You are so lucky!" So privileged! ("Offred" 17:00-17:39).

For Wives, on the other hand, the Child represents a mix of power and freedom, in different degrees: power because as higher-class women they earn status when they become (adoptive) mothers, being showered with compliments, attention and adoration ("Birth Day"

12:00-12:50; “Late” 11:38-11:50); Freedom because, although some more than others, Wives are aware of the discrimination they suffer within Gilead’s social system and hope for a future in which their Children will live freer than they currently do, although through the lens of Gilead’s Symbolic order, that is, following its values. This becomes clearer when Serena is capable of rallying up a group of Wives to advocate in favour of teaching young girls to read the Bible (“The Word” 22:50-24:50).

Gilead, then, creates the political fantasy of power and freedom for those within its grasp, and does so by working towards a future where that power and that freedom (as well as the survival of the human race) is fulfilled. The representation of this future is, thus, the Child, who is used as the beacon of hope and must be defended at all costs. However, as explained earlier, the Child is nothing but a smokescreen to hide the true *drives* behind Gilead’s Symbolic order, the constant and immediate access to meaningless jouissance found in the power held by those in charge, and the freedom repeatedly rejected by those oppressed in favour of who may come next. A smokescreen very easily held together by the ultra-conservative Christian setting in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* is submerged.

That ultra-conservative Christian ideal is what Edelman describes in his work as tending “towards a greater awareness of, and insistence on, the literalization of the figural logics that various social subjects are made to inhabit and enact” (*No Future* 14). In other words, the right wing of politics is more aware of the instability of identity (and, in this case, of power and freedom), and thus furiously attempts to pin it down as much as possible. This attempt of control over identity, power and freedom, this attempt to gain *stability*, is expressed through the act of reproduction, through the postponement of that stability onto the next generation as a way of striving towards it. Gilead, then, by fervently defending the mandate to “Be fruitful and multiply” to the point of violence, represents in *The Handmaid’s Tale* a radical version of the right wing, Christian political ideal Edelman refers to in *No Future*. And in a radicalized, high-

stakes context such as Gilead, Edelman's sinthomosexual becomes a much more dangerous threat to the Symbolic order, one that must be dealt with harshly.

3.2. "We're not friends, Serena": The Sinthomosexual and Gilead's Catachrestic Myth

If reproductive futurism's main enemy is the sinthomosexual, represented through June Osborne, its main asset is its catachrestic nature, which will be further explained and developed later. Within Gilead's Symbolic, this is represented through Serena Joy's character. This catachrestic nature, Serena's embodiment of which will be explored below, is directly contradicted by sinthomosexuality's ability to cut to the chase and, as a consequence, destabilizes the carefully crafted metonymy, built upon catachresis, that reproductive futurism is based on. In Edelman's theory, and, more importantly, in Gilead's Symbolic, one cannot live without the other, and thus both will be expanded on in favour of setting a better understanding of their representation within *The Handmaid's Tale*.

3.2.1. "Led astray by a gifted and amoral liar": June Osborne and Edelman's Sinthomosexual

Edelman's definition of sinthomosexuality, as his definition of the Child and of reproductive futurism, becomes exacerbated because of the precarious state of the human race within *The Handmaid's Tale* context. The sinthomosexual, then, becomes any person who may threaten to expose the makings behind the Symbolic order of Gilead. If, in our present days, that is represented through queerness and revindications for the safe access to abortion (*No Future* 15), in Gilead it is *anything* that may endanger the conception and birth of the Child, that is, anything that may oppose Gilead's regime.

This includes, of course, queerness and the right to decide over our own bodies, but it is extended to englobe political and religious dissidence, as seen in the first episode when June and Emily walk by the wall where "a priest, a doctor, a gay man" are hanging ("Offred" 15:00-15:24). Gilead views as a threat to its system any aspect in a person that may point out the

placeholding nature of the Child and expose the death drive behind it, and so it violently controls its population and severely punishes those who may step slightly out of line, even within its own power structure ("Jezebels" 37:50-38:47). It is a big threat for Gilead, thus, when someone is capable of stepping out of those lines and survive to see another day.

June Osborne's character is built up and established as one of Gilead's biggest menaces towards the end of the first season of the series, when she follows in Ofglen's steps (one of her fellow Handmaids) and leads a pacific rebellion against Aunt Lydia, who commands them to stone Janine ("Night"-A 45:40-49:46, fig. 2). Gilead tries to scare her into obedience, alongside the rest of the Handmaids, but fails, and June, pregnant, is able to attempt an escape from Gilead with Nick's help ("June" 46:10-52:20). She is caught once again, though, and psychologically abused into submission by showing her the dead body of a man who attempted to help her leave after continuously manifesting dissidence towards Gilead's social etiquette ("Other Women" 36:42-40:28). Despite this, June breaks Gilead's rules constantly after, by not reporting her problems with the pregnancy until she almost bleeds out ("Seeds" 11:29-12:39; 31:00-33:15), by getting the daughter she gives birth to out of Gilead ("The Word" 58:00-59:00), by helping the resistance fight Gilead ("Mary and Martha" 16:24-17:00), and even aiding in the escape of a big group of children, as Rita tells Luke when they land in Canada: "She did this. June. Your June. She did this. She did everything" ("Mayday" 57:11-57:18).

June's ability to leave *relatively* unharmed by Gilead for most of these traitorous acts (it is the final one, the escape of the children, that grants her the title of being "a Delilah" who is misleading other Handmaids and is dangerous to the nation ("Pigs" 15:50-17:00)) is founded in her exploitation of the nation's own obsession with reproductive futurism. Because June is a Handmaid, and thus has the ability to give birth, she is seen as an extension of the Child, as previously mentioned. If Gilead attempted against her life, it would be positioning itself *against*

reproduction, *against* the Child and the future it symbolizes, and thus contradicting its own principles and evidencing them as meaningless.

It is only after *many* infringements that they consider putting her life in danger, deciding against it in the end in favour of taking her, alongside the rest of the Handmaids that aided the children's escape, to a breeding farm where they would work and birth children for Commanders and their Wives:

> JUNE: Just kill me.
>
> AUNT LYDIA: Oh! You're not going to be executed. None of you are! Not one Handmaid can be spared. We lost so many children, thanks to you. All of you girls were chosen by God and you will discharge your sacred duty.
>
> JUNE: We're getting new postings?
>
> AUNT LYDIA: In a manner of speaking. You are all going to a Magdalene Colony[14]. You will labor in the fields. and when you are ripe, your Commander and his wife will come to you and perform the Ceremony. Then you will rejoin your sisters at work. You will all live out your days in a blessed cycle of service.
>
> JUNE: A breeding colony.
>
> AUNT LYDIA: An innovation I had my doubts about, but I can see the value for certain temperaments. ("The Crossing" 43:36-44:47).

June, thus, is in the "privileged" position of being able to pull at Gilead's strings without being outright shot for it, all while inside Gilead's Symbolic order. In other words, she uses the rules of the game Gilead has set to not only win, but break the board. As Edelman states: "Not that we [the Queers] are, or ever could be, outside the Symbolic ourselves; but we can,

[14] The Colonies in Gilead are, traditionally, working camps reserved for women who have broken Gilead's law in some way or another and cannot be executed, usually because it would affect Gilead's image. Most of the ones that are seen in the series are radioactive wastelands where women are forced to shovel poisoned and murderous dirt into buckets for it to be dispensed of, slowly dying in the process.

nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures—*within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality—for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbors within" (*No Future* 22, original emphasis).

Moreover, June is not only interpreted as a sinthomosexual because of her role as the enemy of Gilead and, thus, the enemy of reproductive futurism. She is also presented as such because her constant attacks to Gilead, her *drive* towards bringing it down, evidence the meaninglessness behind the smokescreen that is Gilead's reproductive futurism. The power she holds and the freedom she enjoys by laughing in Gilead's face and facing no consequences prove that the postponement of achieving these goals onto the future generations is no more than a ruse to hide that the jouissance they produce are readily available for whoever may wish.

June's character begins the series against Gilead, but still a defendant of reproductive futurism. She sacrifices her freedom several times in an attempt to save her daughter Hannah, who Gilead kidnapped when they captured them both attempting to flee the country as the new regime was set into place ("Offred" 3:50-4:09). As already mentioned, she refuses Janine's offer of suicide because she has to survive "because of her daughter", and when given the chance the next season, she turns away from an open route to escape in favour of staying for Hannah ("The Word" 58:30-1:00:00). For June specifically, Hannah is the incarnation of the Child, the representation of the freedom she wishes but postpones, because it cannot be fulfilled until Hannah herself is free. June's *want*, then, her sinthome, is the dismantling of Gilead, as she believes that when it is destroyed, Hannah's freedom will bring her own. This belief in her sinthome is, as previously explained, the "defining mark of futurism" (*No Future* 37), but June's attitude as the series moves forward, which becomes increasingly violent towards Gilead's Symbolic order, makes me think that she pushes past this stage and ends up fitting a lot better into the descriptor of sinthomosexual.

As previously explained, Edelman's coinage of sinthomosexuality defines someone who is attracted to the *want* that the sinthome creates, rejecting the projection into the future of the eventual jouissance of achieving power, freedom, or a fulfilled identity, in favour of the meaningless enjoyment produced in the moment by the drive towards that goal. As June's character evolves and changes throughout the series, it seems as if her previously "normative" positioning in Gilead's Symbolic order as follower of reproductive futurism, as someone whose freedom is postponed in favour of Hannah's, is slowly deluded as she moves from "believing" to "identifying". While at the beginning June *believes* it will be Gilead's dismantling that which will free Hannah and herself, as she starts to take increasingly drastic measures to fight Gilead from the inside, she begins to *identify* with Gilead's destruction. In other words, June evolves into viewing herself as Gilead's destroyer, thus taking pleasure in the freedom of the actions themselves instead of postponing that pleasure for the sake of Hannah.

This shift towards such a narcissistic perspective, believing *she herself* is the destroyer of Gilead, can be interpreted from what Martha Nussbaum states is one of the causes of anger: status-injury. Based on Aristotle's development of down-ranking, Nussbaum argues that anger from status-injury occurs when someone's behaviour towards us causes our status, our "honour", to become diminished (20-21). This kind of behaviour can be intentional or, as Nussbaum expands, "part of a pattern of belief or conduct" (21), as part, maybe, of a Symbolic order that denigrates in one way or another the status of a certain group of people. This type of status-injury anger has "a narcissistic flavor: rather than focusing on the wrongfulness of the act as such, a focus that might lead to concern for wrongful acts of the same type more generally, the status-angry person focuses obsessively on herself and her standing vis-à-vis others" (21).

Following this line of reasoning, June, wronged as she is throughout the series by Gilead both consciously and unconsciously, begins to brew inside herself an anger[15] towards Gilead's

[15] Elizabeth Moth's performance of June in the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is very keen on portraying that boiling rage and anger that her character feels throughout the series.

Symbolic and, more specifically, towards how the wrongdoings she has suffered relate *her* to Gilead's regime. She obsesses, thus, with herself, those who she views as equals (that is, other Handmaids that suffer the same way she does, making their anger her own), and how she stands in the face of Gilead, allowing the anger within her to precipitate into making her believe she becomes Gilead's downfall and, as a consequence, turning her into exactly that.

This identification with Gilead's destruction is not a linear evolution whatsoever, as it begins with the refusal to stone Janine, aforementioned, but June attempts to step in line a few times after this due to Gilead's violence. It is not linear, but it is exponential, and every time June breaks Gilead's rules and is punished, she becomes more and more obsessed with bringing Gilead down, and more violent in her ways. For example, when she aids in the escape of a big group of children from Gilead and is shot, June is saved by her friends and they all take refuge in the home of Esther Keyes, a teenage Wife who has been drugging her elderly husband in order to keep him semi-unconscious, and who helps the resistance and Handmaids whenever she can. When a man is found on Esther's grounds, June ties him up in the barn and helps Esther torture and brutalize him as revenge for the sexual abuse Esther suffered:

> SOLDIER: We'll take him to the river. Deal with him.
>
> JUNE: No. (To the HANDMAIDS) Girls. This man betrayed his own country, the United States. He's a traitor. And this man raped a child. Repeatedly. The punishment for these crimes is death. (To ESTHER) You were right. You were right. We're Mayday. We don't hide. We fight. And in this place, we all fight. (Giving ESTHER the knife) Good girl. Make me proud.
>
> ESTHER: I will. ("Pigs" 46:03-49:26).

The biggest evidence of June's shift towards identification with her sinthome, with the destruction of Gilead, may be the way in which her drive towards it does not only not disappear

once she is capable of escaping to Canada, but it is radicalized. Despite gaining the freedom she had been fighting for, June's actions do not decrease in brutality and excess. For example, after visiting Serena, who is in holding waiting for trial, and humiliating her (a scene brimming with anger and a great example of the status-injury's wish of "punching back" to retrieve one's pride, as seen in fig. 3), June's wrath overflows into her raping Luke, her husband ("Home" 38:07-41:30). Or how, by working with Nick who is still in Gilead, she brings together a group of ex-Handmaids and kidnaps Commander Waterford, chasing him through the woods and brutally beating him to death, ripping part of his cheek out with her teeth, hanging him from a half-destroyed building and mailing a finger to Serena ("The Wilderness" 44:00-54:10, fig. 4). This could be a consequence of June, already adapted into her sinthomosexual nature, being ripped out of the Symbolic order in which her sinthomosexuality is founded. As Edelman explains:

> *[S]inthom*osexuals … only emerge, in abjection, to support the emergence of Symbolic form; to metaphorize and enact the traumatic violence of signification whose meaning-effacing energies, released by the cut that articulates meaning, the Symbolic order constantly must exert itself to bind. … As embodiments of unintelligibility, [*sinthom*osexuals] must veil what they expose, becoming, as figures for it, the means of its apparent subjection to meaning. … *[S]inthom*osexuality, though destined, of course, to be claimed for intelligibility, consents to the logic that makes it a *figure* for what meaning can never grasps. Demeaned, it embraces de-meaning as the endless insistence of the Real that the Symbolic can never master for meaning now or in the "future" (*No Future* 107, original emphasis).

Put in simpler terms, the sinthomosexual exists as a product of the Symbolic, as that which symbolizes the Real, the meaninglessness, and embraces it. As a consequence, a

sinthomosexual cannot exist if extirped from the Symbolic order that created it. This parallels the way that June's behaviour, already antisocial[16] when she was within Gilead's border where her sinthomosexuality emerged, becomes increasingly unstable, turning to her husband Luke as a target for discharging her anger in the absence of Gilead. It also explains why, even when she is free from Gilead's literal shackles, she continues attacking its figures, such as Commander Waterford or, mostly during the fifth season, Serena Joy. When June finds herself removed from the Symbolic order she was "born"[17] into, she attempts to look for it wherever she may find it, because when she is removed from Gilead's Symbolic, she ceases to signify its destruction.

June's sinthomosexuality, thus, presents itself through violence and anger, emerged from the constant battering she suffered from Gilead. It is this anger that which pushes her to identify *with* Gilead's destruction in place of simply *believing* that it will come, stopping the pretension that Hannah's freedom will be what brings her own and embracing on a more conscious level (although never completely) the freedom she can create for herself when indulging in Gilead's dismantling *as the dismantler*, instead of waiting for its downfall. And it is this identification with being *the dismantler* that which spirals her out of control when removed from the Symbolic order in which she was christened as sinthomosexual, intensifying the anger that fuelled it in the first place.

3.2.2. "You built this whole world just so you could have someone": Serena Joy's Catachrestic Nature

Catachresis is defined as the "improper use of words" and originates from the Greek *κατάχρησις,* misuse of a word, which itself comes from *κατά,* with sense of perversion and *χρῆσθαι,* to use ("Catachresis"), that is, the perversive use of, in this case, a word. In Lacanian

[16] In the sense that June's behaviour was *against* Gilead's social order.
[17] Born in the sense that her identity as sinthomosexual appears within Gilead's Symbolic.

psychoanalytic theory, and especially through Edelman's interpretation, every word is already catachrestic, as the signifier can never properly represent the signified and, thus, every word is always constantly being misused. When applied to Edelman's reproductive futurism, catachresis plays an important role in the element of postponement of meaning in the "chain of signifiers lived as history" (*No Future* 8), as it holds up the smokescreen that tricks us into believing in the true existence of that future. As Edelman explains: "the human remains bound to the notion of futurity as the site of its endless realization through and as catachresis" (*No Future* 104).

Catachresis, thus, is needed in the Symbolic order as it reassures its subjects "insofar as we read it as signalling the necessary production of future meanings and thus as affirming the identity of the future with the promise of meaning itself" (*No Future* 105). It is, as stated, reproductive futurism's most effective weapon, and it is represented in *The Handmaid's Tale* through Serena Joy's character. Serena is Commander Waterford's wife and June's mistress, and she is presented throughout the series as June's counterpart. Her catachrestic role is evidenced through her surface level embracement of Gilead's social order, while at the same time bending it or outright despising it. Serena is a politician (who are notoriously known for their use of catachrestic language, saying one thing to mean another), and before Gilead's ascension to power, she was one of its main advocates, writing a book about "domestic feminism" and the role of the woman in the home, as exposed when a Mexican ambassador visits them:

> AMBASSADOR CASTILLO: I heard you speak once, at a rally. Before the war. You were very passionate.
>
> SERENA: Women were abandoning their families and we needed to make a change. We were running out of time.
>
> CASTILLO: You were arrested for inciting to riot, if I recall?

SERENA: I had a temper in those days.

CASTILLO: Back then, did you imagine a society like this?

SERENA: A society that has reduced its carbon emissions by 78% in three years?

CASTILLO: A society in which women can no longer read your book. Or anything else.

SERENA: No. I didn't. God asks for sacrifices, Mrs. Castillo. That has always been His way. But He gives the righteous blessings in return and I think that it's safe to say Gilead has been blessed in so many ways. ("A Woman's Place" 14:15-15:30, fig. 5).

Serena, in this example, uses catachrestic language to attempt to deflect Ambassador Castillo's uncomfortable questions. She uses words "improperly" by wrongfully interpreting, on purpose, "like this" in "a society like this" as something other than the elephant in the room, that which Gilead is known for: its repression of women's rights. She then answers that those sacrifices are needed for Gilead to stay in power, but not only does she do this through the convoluted language of religion, which is catachrestic all by itself, but she *does not believe her own words*, even if she herself may think she does. As seen right after the aforementioned scene, Serena was considering writing a second book before Gilead's rise to power: "You know, I was thinking fertility as a national resource, reproduction as a moral imperative. I think that's a really interesting idea, and it could make for a great second book" (17:31-17:46). Moreover, she is seen enviously looking at Aunt Lydia's pencil when she discovers the Aunts are allowed to write down the pregnant Handmaid's medical checkups, and she reacts defensively when Lydia defines it as "a burden more than anything" ("Seeds" 4:24-4:38, fig. 6).

Serena's habit of misinterpreting words, that is, weaponizing catachresis from the perspective of the interpreter, goes to the extent of her burning down her home. When June returns after letting Nichole (the daughter she gives birth to for Serena) escape with Emily, Commander Waterford comes up with a ruse to avoid the execution of the entire household.

When explaining this to Serena, who is in an extremely delicate mental state, as she has had her finger cut off for reading and has just lost her child, she tells him, angrily, that he does not have to protect her. Waterford answers that he is "protecting this house", to which Serena proceeds to set the bed on fire and reduce the building to flames ("Night"-B 27:29-36:12, fig. 7). Her literal and at the same time allegorical interpretation of Waterford's words, which lead her to a literal reaction (burning down the house) with an allegorical interpretation (breaking the marriage as best she can within Gilead's circumstances) is purely catachrestic.

Despite all this, I would argue that the way Serena embodies catachresis is through the little details in her behaviour as much as the bigger, overarching elements of her character. On the one hand, on a more macroscopic level, she is part of the Wives, for whom most of Gilead's performativity is set up for, as seen in the scene where several Commanders decide on how Handmaids will be inseminated:

> COMMANDER PRYCE: You're talking about concubines.
>
> COMMANDER GUTHRIE: I don't care what you want to call it.
>
> COMMANDER WATERFORD: The wives would never accept it.
>
> GUTHRIE: That's a non-issue.
>
> WATERFORD: We won't succeed without their support. You know that.
>
> PRYCE: Maybe the wife should be there, for the act. It would be less of a violation. There is Scriptural precedent.
>
> WATERFORD: "Act" may not be the best name from a branding perspective. The Ceremony?
>
> GUTHRIE: Sounds good. Nice and Godly. The wives would eat that shit up. ("Jezebel" 17:03-17:40).

Although almost all of Gilead's Commanders are religious, that which pushes forward their *want*, that is, that which they wish to achieve through reproductive futurism, is power. Power is more practical, less performative, and thus most of them do not need for the catachrestical nature of acts such as The Ceremony. The Wives, on the other hand, do not drive *only* for power, but for freedom also. As women, they believe the sacrifices they are making within Gilead's infrastructure are for the freedom of their Children, freedom from the corrupted lives that they believe were lived before Gilead's takeover, but also freedom from Gilead's shackles as well, in the sense of believing that their daughters will be able to enjoy a less restrictive life than they have, although within Biblical boundaries. Gilead's entire performative structure is set in place to avoid the Wives realizing that this second freedom is actually attainable if they just take it, and thus their behaviour when engaging in this performative structure is catachrestic, including Serena's.

On the other hand, Serena's character presents smaller details in which it is clear that, although saying or enacting one thing, she means or wishes for another. For example, when Aunt Lydia finds her biting her nails when she is nervous and cannot smoke ("Seeds" 5:00-5:10, fig. 8), she *acts* by biting her nails but *wants* to smoke. Or when she slaps Rita instead of June because the latter is pregnant and thus Serena cannot physically hurt her ("Other Women" 34:40-35:00, fig. 9). Or, finally, when she answers Aunt Lydia's questions directed to June because they are about the pregnancy and Serena considers, as both she herself and Gilead have convinced her to, that the pregnancy is her own ("Seeds" 3:50-5:00, fig. 10). It is these little details, I believe, which represent Serena's *embodiment* of reproductive futurism's catachresis, and not only her passive experiencing of it through Gilead's Symbolic order.

Serena's political background allows her a unique position as someone who is *aware* of much of Gilead's catachrestic nature, but still participates of it on both a conscious and unconscious level. When her husband reminds her that she must not read, as she knows it is the

law, she answers by saying "Yes, I do. I helped write it" ("Night"-A 13:10-13:20). She is not aware at the beginning of the series of the emptiness of the promises reproductive futurism makes, and she actively participates in the veneration of the Order of the Child, but she is aware of the catachrestic performativity through which Gilead attempts to hide the access to immediate freedom the Wives could achieve if they wished to, even if she does not like being aware of this and pretends they are sacrifices that must be made. It is, though, this negated awareness, as well as Serena's most catachrestic relationship, the one she has with June, that which allows me to make my final claim: that sinthomosexuality is not isolated to one character alone within a text, but can expand beyond itself.

3.3. "You and I, we have a bond": Serena and June, Affinity and Sinthomosexuality

Serena and June's relationship is presented throughout the series as a "both sides of the same coin" dynamic. While June represents Gilead's downfall, as previously mentioned, Serena represents that which Gilead stands for, and the sacrifices made in favour of keeping Gilead up and running. Despite this opposition, both characters are highly intelligent, leaders of their own groups of people, and fiercely devoted to their causes. In addition, Serena's character brings out the most radicalized insurgence in June, in the same way that June encourages Serena to break Gilead's rules, that is, to develop and embrace her own sinthomosexuality.

The way they both do this is by exploiting the affinity they are capable of finding within one another. This affinity, this rapport, is founded on Irigaray's idea that men and women's desires are never the same and will never meet directly (*This Sex* 27), implying, then, that women's desires, between themselves, *can and will meet directly*. *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplifies this through Commander Waterford and Serena's relationship. As Irigaray and Edelman develop, the figure of the Child, the ability to reproduce, is the excuse behind which heterosexuality hides to defend its naturality and the false pretension that sexual rapport between the sexes actually exists. The Child is, as I have previously explained, the "indirect

means" through which cisgender heterosexual men and women's desires find themselves. When a couple, then, is uncapable of reproducing, this false sexual rapport is non-existent, evidencing even more clearly the lack of affinity between them.

In Gilead this is taken to the extreme, as everything is. Within Gilead's Symbolic, sex without the goal of reproduction is considered a Sin of the Flesh. This is set into place as a measure to protect the future Child, by discouraging any kind of sexual intercourse that could prevent that Child from being born (be it same-sex relationships, protected sex, or any sexual practice that may evidence in one way or another the immediate jouissance that is achievable without the need of believing in reproductive futurism). Because of this, Commanders and Wives are not meant to have sex, since both of them together cannot create a Child. When Waterford is incapable of getting aroused during one of the Ceremonies, Serena offers to help and is rejected, as it is against Gilead's law ("Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum" 28:30-31:30). Sometime afterwards, when Serena and Waterford have had sex to celebrate a successful trade ("A Woman's Place" 39:00-41:55), and Serena catches Waterford cheating on her with June, he blames Serena of the infidelity "You brought lust and temptation back into this house. On your back, and on your knees. If I've sinned, then you led me to it" ("Night"-A 14:12-14:30).

Waterford's cruel dismissiveness of Serena when he first rejects her, as well as his humiliation of her when blaming her for his cheating, could exemplify how, without the Child to focus their desires on, the false rapport becomes harmful and self-destructive. Without the possibility of the Child, the fantasy does not hold up; the fantasy, as Edelman puts it, "of heterosexual love, and the reproductive Couple it elevates, as delivering us from the pull of the Real and the absence of sexual rapport" (*No Future* 82). Thus, presented with the loneliness of a lack of affinity made evident by the inexistence of a common Child with Waterford, Serena's

catachrestic relationship with June is not only explained through her wish to view June's child as her own, but also as a consequence of the affinity they *can* find within each other.

Serena's view of her relationship with June, at the beginning of the series, is of a catachrestic nature, purely influenced by Gilead's reproductive futurism and Symbolic order. She pictures June as the bearer of her future baby, and thus as an extension, in some way, of herself as well as the Child. This is held up by Gilead's performative traditions, such as the way in which the Wife holds the Handmaid when the Ceremony is performed ("Offred" 29:29-31:10, fig. 11), or how the wife sits behind the Handmaid when she is giving birth ("Birth Day" 21:30-23:50, fig. 12), it even goes to the extent of performing a kind of "binding" ceremony, where the Handmaid kneels in front of the Wife and their hands are tied together, quite similar to the handfasting tradition of marriage, parallelism emphasized by the knotted threads of red and teal ("Other Women" 25:35-28:50, fig. 13). In addition to this catachrestic view, Serena finds affinity within June from almost the beginning, although she postpones this affinity towards her future Child through metonymy, through catachrestic behaviour.

Despite apparently disliking June, Serena shows kindness to her when this is not only not required, but viewed wrongly: she allows her to hold the Putnam's baby while looking at her softly ("Late" 11:55-12:50, fig. 14), and she gifts June a music box that used to belong to Serena as a child ("Jezebel" 43:59-45:16). She worries about her, even confessing, although apparently by accident, that she considers the Ceremony atrocious: "You know, what you do, what we do together is so terrible… It's terribly hard, and we must remain strong. Which is why I feel so blessed to have you" ("Late" 19:05-19:25). These acts of kindness, though, appear mostly when June seems to be pregnant with Serena's future baby, as if Serena will only allow herself the vulnerability of admitting her affinity with June when it is easier for her to interpret that affinity as if towards herself and the Child. In other words, that which disguises Serena's true affinity towards June is her catachrestic view of June as an extension of herself because

she holds her future baby, and as an extension of the Child, intensified whenever June shows indications of being pregnant or when she *is* pregnant. This is further exemplified when considering Serena's rapid change of attitude when it is discovered that June is not pregnant:

> SERENA: Offred, blessed day. Please, come on up. What do you think? (SERENA gestures to the baby room). I know we're still in such early stages. But I've been wanting to clean this room out for quite some time and the light here is so beautiful in the morning. And by His word, all things are possible to him that believeth.
>
> JUNE: Mrs. Waterford…
>
> SERENA: (Holding JUNE's hand) I want to tell you something. Fred and I, we tried for so long. It was hard to keep faith but (holding JUNE's face in her hand) here you are. You're right here. You're my miracle. My beautiful miracle. (Kisses JUNE's hand). Truly.
>
> JUNE: Mrs. Waterford, I'm not pregnant. I got my period.
>
> SERENA: When?
>
> JUNE: Last night.
>
> SERENA: (Grabbing JUNE's arm and dragging her up the stairs to JUNE's room. Throwing JUNE on the floor). You will stay here, and you will not leave this room. Do you understand me? (Kneeling next to JUNE and screaming into her ear) Do you understand me?!
>
> JUNE: Yes, Mrs. Waterford.
>
> SERENA: Things can get much worse for you. ("Late" 44:05-47:00, fig. 15).

Serena's rapid changing attitude in this scene is, in my view, a consequence of finding herself confronted with the genuine affection she feels towards June and being unable to process it properly, thus reacting violently. To put it in more psychoanalytic terms, Serena's obsessive

drive towards the Child, both in a Symbolic and literal sense, allows her to show kindness towards June when June is (apparently) pregnant, as it follows reproductive futurism's laws. Because June is seen as an extension of Serena and the Child by Gilead's Symbolic order, Serena believes, catachrestically, that what she feels towards June is actually towards the Child. She openly shows not only affinity, but affection towards June, being vulnerable towards her, calling her "her miracle". When the smokescreen is ripped away and June's pregnancy is shown to be inexistant, Serena becomes aware of the jouissance and freedom she feels when acknowledging her affinity to June. This awareness threatens to dismantle Serena's view of Gilead's Symbolic, evidencing the immediate access to enjoyment that is at Serena's fingertips if she just takes it, and, as it contradicts her belief in reproductive futurism, she reacts in negation and violently, identifying June as the culprit of this brief peek into the meaninglessness of reproductive futurism and punishing her for it.

Montelaro adds to this argument in her analysis of Offred's description of Serena's garden in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel by arguing that Serena's "denied sexuality by her husband" leads her to suffer "from a repressed eroticism which finds expression in the destruction of the plants' reproductive systems, a vicarious form of revenge on her husband and the Handmaid who has supplanted her" (242). Although Montelaro defends Serena's violence as jealousy, I argue that this acting out, as the acting out within the series, is a rejection of the acknowledgement of her rapport and affinity with June. She destroys the plants' reproductive system in the same way that she attacks June, because they symbolize that which she wants but has been taught that she cannot have: the chance for affinity.

Other scenes throughout the series further support this. When June is taken to the gynaecologist because she is, this time, actually pregnant, Serena harshly reprimands her for her rebellious behaviour against Gilead "I'd like to be clear. I will not have any more recalcitrance. All of your disruptions, and all of your games and your secrets. All of your smart-

girl bullshit is finished. Do you understand me?", June arrogantly answers by saying "Don't get upset, Serena. It's bad for the baby" ("June" 32:53-33:30). This intense moment is a striking contradiction to Serena's actions a few minutes later: Too focused in a stare-down with June, Serena finally realizes that her husband is calling her attention so she can look at their future child's ultrasound together. After she sees the embryo, her attitude shifts completely, and, when left alone with June again momentarily, she turns to her, kisses her forehead and whispers "God bless you" before leaving (33:57-35:08, fig. 16). Because of June's pregnancy, Serena can, once again, indulge in the jouissance of her affection towards her without breaking reproductive futurism's rules.

Serena's affection towards June is not linear, and she moves back and forth between these two radical points, alternating between psychologically torturing June, punishing her when she threatens to evidence the Symbolic's true emptiness, and bathing her with affection. It is not until June's personality shifts after her first failed attempt to escape, previously explained, that Serena begins to consider June more human and, at the same time, more similar to herself. When June becomes more passive, Serena indicates her concern toward the lack of June's normal arrogance ""Yes Mrs. Waterford", "No, Mrs. Waterford". What is the matter with you?" ("Seeds" 14:21-14:40). June's psychological state becomes worse, and when she is found lying in the rain in her nightgown, she wakes up in a hospital with Serena sitting next to her, waiting for her to awaken ("Seeds" 44:45-45:45, fig. 17). After, while she is having an ultrasound, Serena asks June if she would like to see the baby as well ("First Blood" 2:30-3:25), which becomes the first olive branch in a series of interactions that break Serena's catachrestic view of her relationship with June and emphasize the affinity they share.

Ironically, the way that affinity develops is through the Child. As aforementioned, Serena and Commander Waterford's inability of birthing a Child together means they cannot hope for their desires, which do not coincide due to their sexual differences, to find each other

through the indirect mean of reproduction. This is the opposite with June, as not only is she a woman and thus the sexual difference barrier is non-existent, but she *is* capable of birthing a Child–specifically, a Child for Serena. It is through this shared motherhood (desired and adoptive in Serena's case, experienced and biological in June's) that Serena solidifies the newly discovered image of June as an independent person, not only a catachrestic extension of herself or the future Child, and they begin to have conversations on a more equal, and relaxed, footing[18]:

SERENA: I'm sorry, the clicking.

JUNE: Oh, no, it's just, uh… It's just getting harder to find a good position.

SERENA: Do you remember those huge pillows for expectant mothers?

JUNE: A pregnancy pillow? Yes. Those were sweet.

SERENA: Sweet. I'll look into getting one for us.

JUNE: Thank you.

SERENA: (Hesitant) Offred?

JUNE: (Exasperated) Yes?

SERENA: What's it like? To feel that life inside of you?

JUNE: There's nothing much happening right now, but if you want you can come and feel it. Come on. Give me your hand. (JUNE places SERENA's hand on her belly. Shifts it.) You feel that?

SERENA: (Kneeling next to JUNE) Praise be. It's a miracle.

JUNE: Yeah. It is. ("First Blood" 12:13-14:15, fig. 18).

Although a bumpy road (Serena withdraws from most of the kind actions she offers June when the latter asks to visit her daughter Hannah), she is capable of finding within June an

[18] Serena begins to build bridges between her and June by letting her speak more freely (**"**First Blood" 3:15-4:30) or by inviting other Handmaids over to attempt to create a less strict environment for June (23:26-27:00).

affinity beyond motherhood, rooted in those things they hold in common, such as their literary abilities. June, on the other hand, finds this affinity in the possibility of allyship to bring down Gilead that she finds in Serena. When a bomber Handmaid implodes herself in the opening ceremony of a new centre where many Commanders are, injuring Waterford and leaving him bedridden for some time, Commander Cushing takes control of security within Gilead. Cushing does not believe the story that June was kidnapped, made up to hide her escape attempt, and puts the Waterfords on his target. When June informs Serena of this, she asks Nick for help to submit warrants to the Consular of Divine Law (one of the higher command centres of Gilead) and gets Cushing detained for treason. After, Serena decides to take matters into her own hands and drafts several warrants to reduce Guardian presence in their neighbourhood, asking June for help, as she used to be an editor ("After" 47:42-51:35).

It is in these scenes of collective writing and reading that I wish to stop and analyse more carefully. It is forbidden for women to read and write within Gilead's law, punished by the cutting of a finger or a hand if the transgression is repeated. The sinful act is parallel, directly, to sins of a more carnal nature within Gilead, as outright stated by June's internal monologue:

> We do our work in the evening. She writes. I read. This is a new normal. And an offence to God. In another life, maybe we could've been colleagues. And in this one, we're heretics. I was already on the naughty list. An adulteress, a "fallen woman" as Aunt Lydia used to say. But this is new territory for Serena, I think. How does she feel about falling? She seems pretty fucking happy. ("Women's Work" 1:15-1:54, fig. 19).

The comparison is not only found in *The Handmaid's Tale* adaptation, but it is a big metaphor within the source text, the novel written by Atwood and published in 1985. In this

case, Offred[19] speaks of reading in the presence of Fred Waterford, and she narrates "… I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. …, if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere. While I read, the commander sits and watches me do it, … This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it" (Atwood 190). In addition to this, collaborative writing amongst women has already been correlated to queerness and sexual interactions. As stated by Ehnenn[20] in one of her works:

> In women's literary collaboration, there is an eroticized potential that is both intellectual and sexual. Sensual, subversive, in many ways queer, the pleasure of collaboration is an integral part of and motivating factor for these women coming together to write. And like (lesbian) sex, the pleasure doesn't have to end. Anti-phallogocentric in style and non-goal oriented in process, in many cases female literary partners engage in an ongoing process of living and loving, writing and talking together that never (or rarely) pauses; in sexual terms, there is no refractory period (9).

Thus, Serena's first true big act of resistance against Gilead is of a clearly sexual nature, *queer* sexual nature[21]. And it is this specific act of resistance which allows June to realize that Serena may have the potential, as June does, to destroy Gilead from within, to *become* Gilead's destruction alongside June. In addition, although June's identity *with* Gilead's destruction begins when she refuses to stone Janine, her introduction to the idea that Gilead *can* be destroyed is through Emily, a lesbian Handmaid that works with the resistance. June, then, is presented with the possible destruction of Gilead through a lesbian character and identifies in

[19] It is never outright said within the novel that the narrator is June, as the only name we know her for is Offred, although it is inferred.
[20] She will later go on to publish *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*.
[21] And this is without mentioning the phallic symbolism of the scenes where Serena and June work together (June looking at Serena while clicking the pen, Serena sitting in Waterford's chair as a metaphor for her taking control of the Law of the Father, etc.)

Serena the possibility of destroying Gilead together through an action that is paralleled with lesbian sex. The destruction of Gilead, then, can be equated directly with the queer rapport that women can enjoy together.

After they work together for the first time, June slowly pushes Serena to break Gilead's rules more and more: She convinces Serena to allow Janine to see her dying baby ("Women's Work" 20:20-24:40), and Serena takes action and goes behind her husband's back to allow a Martha, who used to be a paediatrician, treat said dying baby (33:50-35:00), receiving a beating from Fred as a consequence and pushing back her trust in June (36:54-44:00). This drawback from Serena is extreme, and the violence between them returns, to the point in which Serena helps her husband rape a pregnant June so she may give birth earlier and leave the household as soon as possible ("The Last Ceremony" 25:00-29:30). I believe these despicable actions are Serena's reaction to being confronted with the reality behind reproductive futurism, the nothingness behind her drive towards the Child. June, as the sinthomosexual, represents this aimless drive and is, as a consequence, targeted by Serena and violently abused because of it. Serena reacts, in these examples, as if "the wholesale rupturing of the social fabric" (Edelman *No Future* 14) was being caused by June's sole existence, and thus she must repress her, the same way conservatives react to the presence of queer identities.

Despite this, once June has evidenced the nothingness behind reproductive futurism, Serena cannot unsee it. The seed of sinthomosexuality that June plants within her takes root and grows. It is because of this that June is capable of convincing Serena of attempting to change the law that forbids women from reading, by exploiting the affinity she and Serena have in common through that which they both share: their daughter ("The Word" 6:18-6:21). Serena's now growing sinthomosexual nature, though, takes this to the extreme as she reads the Bible in front of the men of the council (22:40-27:49), getting her finger cut off for it and being comforted by June (31:10-34:25, fig. 20).

Opposite to June's case, whose sinthomosexual nature grows exponentially the more Gilead punishes her, Serena usually retracts herself when confronted with the consequences of betraying Gilead in some way. Despite this, the cutting of her finger radicalizes Serena in her sinthomosexuality, although in an unstable way. June has showed her a glimpse of the meaninglessness behind reproductive futurism, and Serena, this time, does not run away, but attaches herself to June and the affinity they share, allowing her to get Nichole out of Gilead:

SERENA: What are you doing?

JUNE: Serena.

SERENA: No. Give me my baby.

JUNE: Serena, listen!

SERENA: Give me my child.

JUNE: I can get her out. I can get her out of here.

SERENA: No…

JUNE: She cannot grow up here. She cannot grow up in this place. Listen to me. You know she can't. I know that you love her so much. I do. I've seen it. Yeah. You can do it.

SERENA: No…

JUNE: Yes, you can. Please. I know how much you love her.

SERENA: Let me have her. So I can say goodbye.

JUNE: Okay. (Hands Nichole over to SERENA).

SERENA: (To Nichole) May the Lord bless you, and keep you. May His face shine on you, and may He be gracious unto you, and may He lift up His countenance upon you. My sweet Nichole. And may He grant you peace. (Hands Nichole back to JUNE).

JUNE: Blessings on you, Serena ("The Word" 45:50-49:00, fig. 21).

For a brief time, June hesitantly drags Serena with her on her path to destroy Gilead, convincing Commander Waterford of allowing his wife to have a "real voice, behind the scenes" ("God Bless the Child" 23:30-25:55). She tells Serena to "wear the dress. Pull the strings" (28:34-28:45), and develops an allyship with her that stands on unstable grounds. Serena's sinthomosexuality, here, has begun to evolve, but it has not fully formed. June has allowed her to see that the power and freedom she postpones onto the future Child, the affinity she searches for, is up for grabs if she wishes so, that reproductive futurism is meaningless, but Serena is still reluctant to let it go.

For June, jouissance comes from her drive towards destroying Gilead; for Serena, that jouissance comes from her drive towards affinity, which she believed she could find within the Symbolic order of reproductive futurism, but that shifts onto June when she finds herself connecting with her beyond what Gilead allows. The parallelism is similar to Edelman's differentiation between sinthome and symptom: "Where the symptom sustains the subject's relation to the reproduction of meaning, sustains, that is, the fantasy of meaning that futurism constantly weaves, the sinthome unravels those fantasies by and within which the subject means" (*No Future* 113-114). Serena's sinthome is her *want* for affinity, her drive towards it, but it is cleverly covered up with an impulse towards motherhood, her symptom, and the postponement of power and freedom that comes with it, which "sustains … the fantasy of meaning that futurism constantly weaves". For June, her sinthome is Gilead's destruction, and because Gilead's destruction cannot be symptomatized through any action that may sustain reproductive futurism, it "unravels" those fantasies. When Serena realizes that her drive towards affinity shifts onto June, her sinthome becomes acknowledged by her, and she resists to the unravelling of the fantasy that comes with it.

Because of this, Serena begins to reject June's drive towards Gilead's dismantling when she is presented, once again, with the possibility of affinity through motherhood that she feels

when she sees Nichole in person, briefly, as organized by June: “We can talk if you like, but you have to understand that seeing her [Nichole] changed everything for me” (“Household” 21:00-21:20). She actively fights to get Nichole back into Gilead, gaining once again June’s distrust and making their relationship implode:

JUNE: You could return the favour.

SERENA: You know? Let’s just stop. Please. This is all going to be over soon. You’re gonna get to go back home, and we’re gonna stay here. And you and I will finally be free of one another.

JUNE: You will never be free of me. You will never be free of me until both my children are safe.

SERENA: That is my constant prayer for Nichole.

JUNE: I trusted you! To let her have the best life possible! To do the right thing!

SERENA: And I trusted you to stay with her!

JUNE: I gave her the name of Nichole. I did that to honor you for getting her out. You will not let her go!

SERENA: Because I love her!

JUNE: This isn’t love! You can’t love! You don’t know how! Serena, you built this whole world just so that you could have someone, but it didn’t work! You’re small, you’re cruel and you’re empty. You will always be empty.

SERENA: I should have put a ring in your mouth the day that we met.

JUNE: I should’ve let you burn when I had the chance (44:00-47:30).

After this, June temporarily identifies Serena as a symbol of Gilead, and antagonizes her as such: She attempts to kill her when she begins to lose her mind after months of isolation (“Heroic” 25:10-27:00), she verbally abuses her when they meet again after they are both out

of Gilead, Serena in holding waiting for trial and June as a refugee (“Home” 36:00-39:33), she mails Serena her dead husband’s finger (“The Wilderness” 50:10-51:20), and she stalks her when she gets back from Fred’s funeral in Gilead (“Dear Offred” 30:50-33:20). When leaving Gilead, Serena becomes the target of June’s obsessions, and her drive towards the destruction of the Symbolic order that held her captive shifts towards the destruction of Serena as the representation of that Symbolic order.

Serena, on her behalf, becomes increasingly uneasy in Gilead when June and her separate, and, in a desperate move for affinity, she betrays Gilead by luring Commander Waterford out of the country into Canadian territory for him to be detained in exchange for spending time with Nichole (“Liars” 40:30-38:30). While on the trip up north, Serena and Fred briefly reconciliate and have sex (22:45-24:15), which gets Serena pregnant (“Nightshade” 37:25-38:00). I argue that this pregnancy is, metaphorically, proof of Serena’s sinthomosexuality developing (almost) fully. It is when she embraces her drive towards affinity by acting on an impulse that goes against Gilead and thus reproductive futurism that Serena gets what she has wanted throughout all the series: a child. She becomes Gilead’s enemy, not only through treachery, but by calling out the meaninglessness of its reproductive structure as a pregnant Wife. She attempts to indulge in this by asking for June’s forgiveness in search of rebuilding their past relationship, but June reacts violently, as previously mentioned, and rejects this forgiveness (“Home” 36:00-39:33). As expected, Serena once again reacts by retracting herself, briefly going back to promoting Gilead’s reproductive futurism, this time openly to spite June by making sure Fred’s funeral is televised and Hannah is the only child that offers flowers (“Ballet” 51:20-53:10).

June and Serena, then, enter a cat-and-mouse dynamic, quite typical of them at this point, in which they both taunt each other either through violence or psychological torment. This continues until June is kidnapped by Gilead’s forces when she crosses into No Man’s Land,

and taken for execution. Serena, who is being held hostage by a Gileadean family as if she was their Handmaid, begs the Commander in charge of her to see the execution, and he allows her to leave with the bodyguard in charge of shooting June. Serena then takes the gun from him and shoots the bodyguard, going into labour and forcing June to drive them to safety ("Together" 44:13-49:22). When they crash near a barn and Serena's delivery is imminent, they both take cover in the abandoned farm building and, although almost leaving, June helps Serena give birth to her baby (fig. 22 and 23). The scene alternates between flashbacks of the first birth Serena and June attend in Gilead and Serena's labour in the present, and calls back to the affinity Serena and June found in each other even when they had just met, sharing glances that evidenced how ridiculous they both found Gilead's performances ("No Man's Land" 6:00-6:45), or of grievance when the Handmaid that was giving birth passed away (19:30-20:30, fig. 24).

It is here where, once again and finally, Serena and June meet in the middle: Serena's position of power ripped away from her as she lays vulnerable in front of June, widowed at her hands and abandoned by her country. June's subjugation to her forgotten, as they both stand as refugees and legal equals, holding in her hands the newborn she has helped Serena deliver. June fully admits and accepts her rapport with Serena, her affinity towards her and their similarities. When Serena asks her why June did not kill her when she had the chance, why did she choose to kill Fred and not her, June responds with "I didn't want to" (22:10-23:20, fig. 25). Behind this simple phrase stands the reality that June, although identifying Serena as a symbol of Gilead, never truly saw her as the figure of reproductive futurism she drives to dismantle. Serena, in her potential for sinthomosexuality, in her mindless compulsion towards affinity that is luckily hidden through a drive to motherhood, can keep up with June's unravelling nature, her destructive drive towards bringing down Gilead's Symbolic order. June finds in Serena an affinity, a rapport, that she cannot find with anyone else, including her husband: "Of course you

don't understand how I feel. Of course you don't understand. Look what you did to Serena and her baby" ("Motherland" 16:19-16:37), referring to when the authorities arrest Serena for illegal border trespass after June takes them to the hospital because Luke called them. As Serena tells her in the immigration centre: "You and I, we have a bond. We have been through so much together" (27:39-27:50).

On the other hand, through motherhood, one of the many aspects, arguably the strongest, that they have in common, Serena indulges in the affinity that she feels towards June, leaving behind the resentment she may hold and embracing, fully, her sinthomosexual role. By, quite literally, giving her a child, a source of endless jouissance in the here and the now and not the future, June finally dismantles the infinite postponement of pleasure, of freedom and power, that Serena so closely believed in, and exposes to her, wide and open, the truths behind reproductive futurism: it is a ruse that attempts to hide the meaninglessness of the drive and a fantasy the covers the inexistence of the future. And when Serena attempts to hold onto a last thread of Gileadean Symbolic, instigating June to take the child and let her die, since she "has no future", to sacrifice herself in favour of the Child, as a Handmaid would, June refuses. She turns around, holds Serena's face and tells her she will save her life and the life of her child. She does not allow Serena, this time, to turn away from sinthomosexuality, to continue the legacy of Gilead through her own sacrifice in favour of the Child. She picks Serena up, puts her in the car and drives her and her son to the closest hospital ("No Man's Land" 26:19-35:00, fig. 26 and 27).

It is this way, first through catachrestic misplacement of affection and, after, through genuine affinity, that Serena discovers and embraces her sinthomosexual nature, sharing June's drive towards the endless jouissance born from disregarding the meaningless fantasies of reproductive futurism. It is also this way, finally even, both only in the company of their

children, both fully comfortable in their sinthomosexual nature, that they reunite at the back of a train transporting American refugees towards an unknown destiny:

> JUNE: (To Nichole, who is crying) It's okay. We're gonna find someplace, okay? We're gonna find someplace, and we're gonna sit down. It's gonna be okay. We're going on an adventure… you know that? We're going to a beautiful island where the sky is blue and the water is clear. It's called Hawaii. It's your country and you're gonna love it. Do you hear that, sweetie? Do you hear the baby? There's another baby here. You wanna go see the baby? (JUNE locks eyes with SERENA).
>
> SERENA: Hi, June.
>
> JUNE: Hi, Serena.
>
> SERENA: You got a diaper? ("Safe" 49:50-52:40, fig 28).

4. Conclusions

As shown in this dissertation, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s setting offers a prime example for a queer reading through Edelman's reproductive futurism. As a radicalized version of today's American society, Edelman's twenty-year-old theory blooms when put into Gileadean context. The violent and domineering rules within Gilead do not shy away from Edelman's argument that the right wing of American politics easily identifies "this radical *threat* of queerness" (*No Future* 14, original emphasis), brutally punishing anyone they may deem as a sinthomosexual, a threat to the Child and to everything reproductive futurism represents, may that be power, freedom, identity, the survival of the human race, or the simple wish to be known by someone.

June's sinthomosexual identity, thus, is intertwined within the narrative of the series as she grows, although in a non-linear but substantial fashion, to embrace her role as Gilead's destruction. Easily identified as a threat by the powers at hand, she is closely watched and controlled, psychologically tortured, although safe from severe bodily harm as Gilead's murder of a Handmaid would contradict its own principles of protecting the Child (and thus, the Handmaid's by extension) above all. She becomes the sinthomosexual both through her ability to evidence the meaninglessness of Gilead's symbolic, and, as mentioned, through her identification with her sinthome, that is, with Gilead's destruction. As a rebel, radicalized through her anger which is emphasized by the punishments she receives, June evolves to become Gilead's biggest threat, both inside and outside of the country.

This identification of the sinthomosexual in Gilead as anything that may threaten the Child widens substantially Edelman's parallelism of sinthomosexuality and homosexuality. His focus on, specifically, cisgender male homosexuality as the threat to the Child, as the sinthomosexual, would hardly include the possibility of sapphism[22] within its ranks. In Gilead's symbolic order, though, any threat to reproductive futurism is directly connected to

[22] Sapphism is used here as an umbrella term that includes bisexuality as well as lesbianism (Eversoll).

sinthomosexuality, and thus the queerness of the sinthomosexual is expanded beyond gay men, and relationships between women become a dreaded menace. As a country characterized by its control over women, Gilead thus becomes even more paranoid around the possibility of bonding between women, and manipulates those who may fall under its lure easier, the Wives, by emphasizing its catachrestic aspects.

Serena, as previously discussed, embodies Gilead's catachresis in several convincing ways. As a Wife, she participates of the traditional aspects the government feeds to them in favour of keeping them tame, but as a woman and politician who helped build Gilead from its earliest concept to fruition, she is aware of the performance of said traditions. Despite this, her compulsion towards finding affinity, luckily symptomatized as an impulse towards wanting descendance, and thus easily adapted into reproductive futurism, pushes her to embrace Gilead's symbolic order. As a character, Serena's catachrestic nature roots itself in the smaller, more identifying aspects of herself, such as how she manipulates words or substitutes some actions with others. It is this embodiment of catachresis which, I argue, makes Serena the perfect example of *why* reproductive futurism, and Gilead by extent, feels so threatened by the sinthomosexual.

June and Serena's relationship, at first based on a catachrestic dynamic in which Serena sees her Handmaid as nothing more than an extension to herself, slowly evolves as she sees June more as an equal. It is in this transition period, I believe, where Serena is slowly becoming aware of the affinity she truly feels with June, despite supressing it. The acknowledgment of this affinity, most of the time, precipitates in violence enacted by Serena towards June as she identifies her as a threat, as a sinthomosexual, paralleled to Edelman's explanation of how the conservative politics identify and abuse queer people in order to "protect" the Child: "The political regime of futurism, unable to escape what it abjects [the Real, the death drive] …

lovingly rocks the cradle of life to the drumbeat of the endless blows it aims at *sinthom*osexuals" (*No Future* 153-154).

It is this affinity that brings so much pain to June, though, that which allows Serena to finally embrace her own sinthomosexuality. As someone whose sinthome relies on the drive towards affinity, towards feeling seen and known, Serena's compulsion can only be resolved within the symbolic order of reproductive futurism through the birth of a Child, as she cannot find that kind of affinity with other loved ones, least of all her husband. As explained, Irigaray's theory of sexual difference comes in handy when reading the relationship between Serena and Fred Waterford, and exemplifies the impossibility of rapport between the two of them due to the lack of reproductive ability they have as a heterosexual couple. Because they cannot generate a child, they cannot even pretend to understand each other, and as a consequence Serena is left to find that understanding somewhere else, specifically through her Handmaid.

Serena, then, is a political figure who, due to her role as founder of Gilead and her identity as a woman (more specifically, a Wife), is aware of the performative and catachrestic nature of the regime. At the same time, her own catachrestic behaviour leads her to, at least partially, rely and depend on Gilead's reproductive futurism in favour of fulfilling her sinthome's impulses, her want for affinity. Serena's embracing of her sinthomosexuality, thus, puts Gilead in a terrifyingly difficult position, as one of the most devoted members of its regime, someone who believed in reproductive futurism's law so strongly that she "helped write it" into reality, becomes aware of the meaninglessness of the order itself. If she can turn away from Gilead's reproductive futurism, from its Symbolic order, then what stops others, those who benefit less from said order, from doing the same as her?

This position of power that Serena holds is also what puts her on June's target, both in a negative and positive way. During their bumpy dynamic in the series, June identifies Serena's potential sinthomosexuality and encourages her to slowly dismantle Gilead from the inside.

Despite this, after Serena's several rejections and abuses of June, the latter begins to identify her with Gilead, targeting her once they are both out of the country. It is not until they both finally stand eye to eye, Serena stripped from her power as she goes into labour, June in control of the situation as she aids her in her birth, literally giving her the baby that Serena was able to conceive when betraying Gilead's symbolic order, that June admits that she never wished to destroy Serena.

Thus, Gilead's symbolic order, keen on controlling women's bodies and minds, pushes Serena towards the catachrestic relationship with June, her Handmaid. This relationship, eventually, leads them both to find affinity in each other, a rapport that does not exist in the union between husband and wife, as their desires cannot meet nor be disguised by childbearing. As Serena slowly begins to see June as someone similar to herself (which goes against Gilead's wishes, as the regime emphasizes that Serena must see June as nothing more than a substitute for her own childbearing), June, the sinthomosexual who is aware of the meaninglessness behind reproductive futurism, is able to pull back the curtains on Gilead's symbolic order and show Serena the strings that precariously hold up its status quo. Serena, who is deeply entrenched in said symbolic order, reacts negatively and violently at first, rejecting the possibility that the affection she shows June and the rapport she has with her is towards June herself and not towards her future Child through the catachresis of the Wife-Handmaid dynamic. But, once June allows her a glimpse behind the scenes, Serena cannot unsee. She is now aware that the jouissance she constantly postpones in favour of the Child can be accessed whenever she wishes through the forbidden relationship she has with June. And, eventually, she embraces it, working as June does towards the dismantling of Gilead and accessing, then, the affinity she wants for, both through the child she conceives when betraying Gilead who is given to her by June, and her relationship with June herself.

Gilead, and reproductive futurism, has a reason to fear the sinthomosexual beyond its negation of the future. Sinthomosexuality has the power to extend beyond the one single character within a narrative that opposes the symbolic order established within the text, it has the power to offer *other options*, other ways that the hegemonic order wishes to look away from as they do not fit within the confinements of what has been established. Sinthomosexuality, and queerness by default, has the potential, through the rapport that Irigaray defends is only available between those who share the same desires[23], to expose the Cult of the Child as the meaningless drive towards a future that, truly, does not exist, and only wishes to maintain a stability that, in reality, is not as stable as it may seem.

As Edelman argues in the final pages of *No Future*, "[f]uturism makes *sinthom*osexuals … of us all" (153), in other words, reproductive futurism's compulsion towards the future, especially towards the defence of the Child and away from the death drive, is nothing more than a clever coverup, similar to Serena's obsession with maternity, to hide the sinthome that drives reproductive futurism again and again, compulsively, against sinthomosexuality. To put it in simpler terms, reproductive futurism's obsession with sinthomosexuality and the death drive is, in the end, its own sinthome and its own death drive.

It is, thus, logical to conclude that sinthomosexuality's ability to expand beyond itself, as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is simply the act of seeing the sinthomosexual nature we all hold within ourselves and in others. Despite Edelman's pessimistic view on sinthomosexuality and its inevitable position as the scapegoat of reproductive futurism, I believe there is a glimpse of hope in knowing, as exemplified, that even the most fervent defender of the hegemonic symbolic order of the Child can find within herself the drive to dismantle it, as long as someone holds her hand through the dark path of self-discovery, as she steps into the light.

[23] Although Irigaray's psychoanalytic theory specifically touches upon sexual difference, I do wish, here, to interpret her words in a more abstract sense, referring, by saying those who share the same desires, to those who share desires beyond the cisgender binary and heterosexual matrix.

Due to time and space constraints some aspects of interest have been left out of this master's thesis but could be addressed in future projects. The themes of motherhood and the queerness of a child having two mothers within the multiple adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale* could be exploited in a more profound manner, as well as a psychoanalytic approach beyond that of Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism. It could also be interesting to attempt an application of Edelman's theories, notably focused on cisgender gay men as previously mentioned, on other texts whose main subjects are not men, for a more intersectional approach. In addition, *The Handmaid's Tale* series adaptation has not finished airing by the time this dissertation is being written, and thus this same project could be expanded when the final season is released. All in all, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and queer psychoanalytic theory are rich areas of study that can offer many angles of research in the future.

5. Appendix

Figure 1. Nick being married off to Eden, a young girl, as a reward for his work as a Guardian.

Figure 2. June follows Ofglen's steps and refuses to stone Janine, leading a peaceful Handmaid protest.

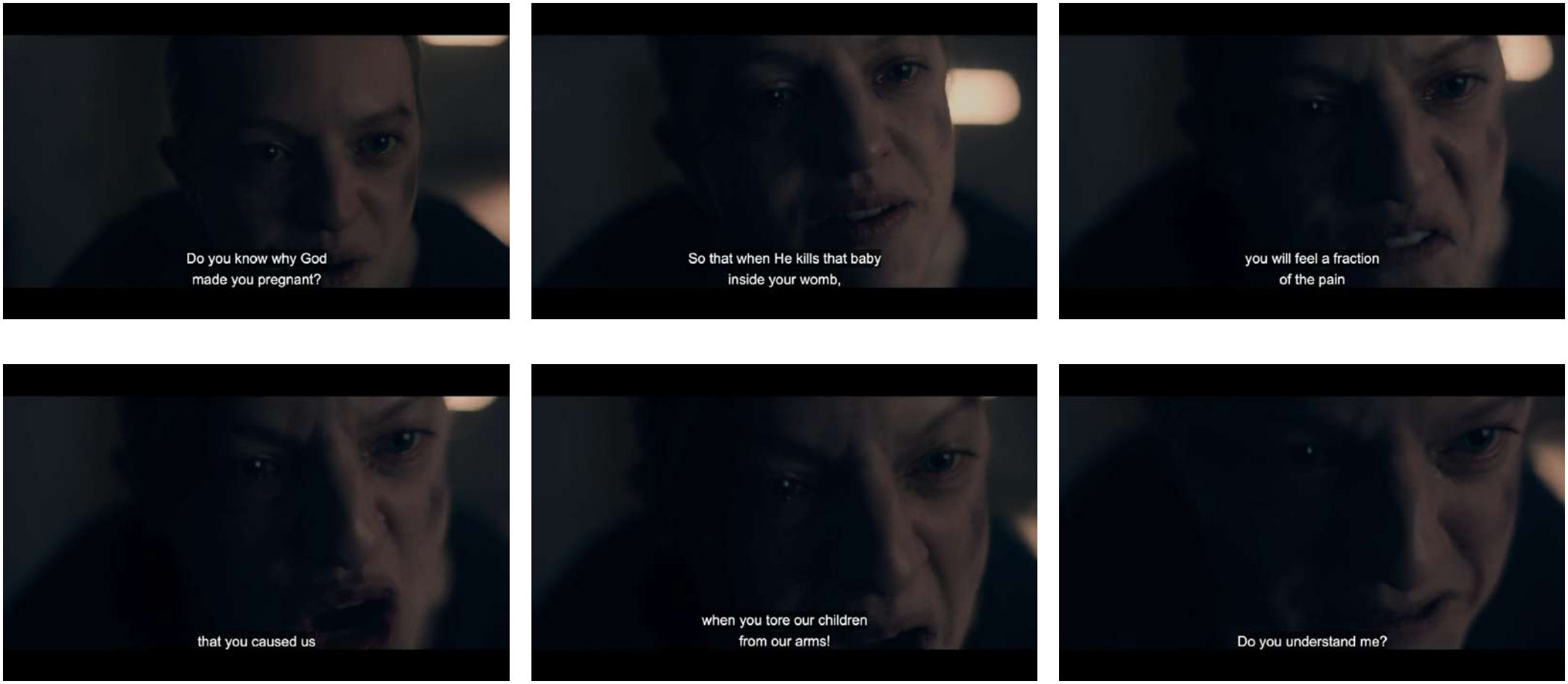

Figure 3. June verbally abuses Serena when the latter attempts to beg for forgiveness.

Figure 4. June, alongside other ex-Handmaids, beats up Waterford and hangs him to die. She rips out his cheek.

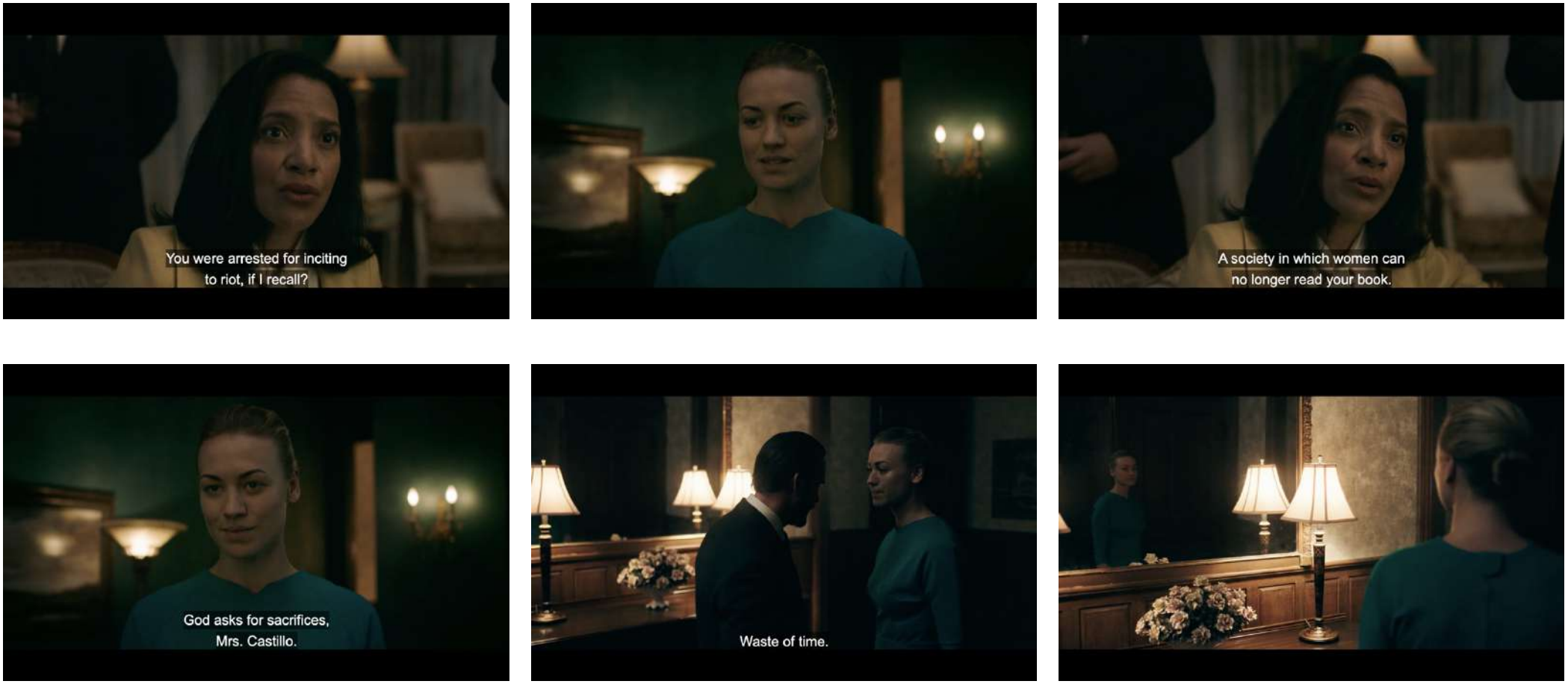

Figure 5. Ambassador Castillo puts Serena in an uncomfortable situation. Later, Fred Waterford humiliates her.

Figure 6. Serena sees and frowns at Aunt Lydia's pencil when taking June's measures.

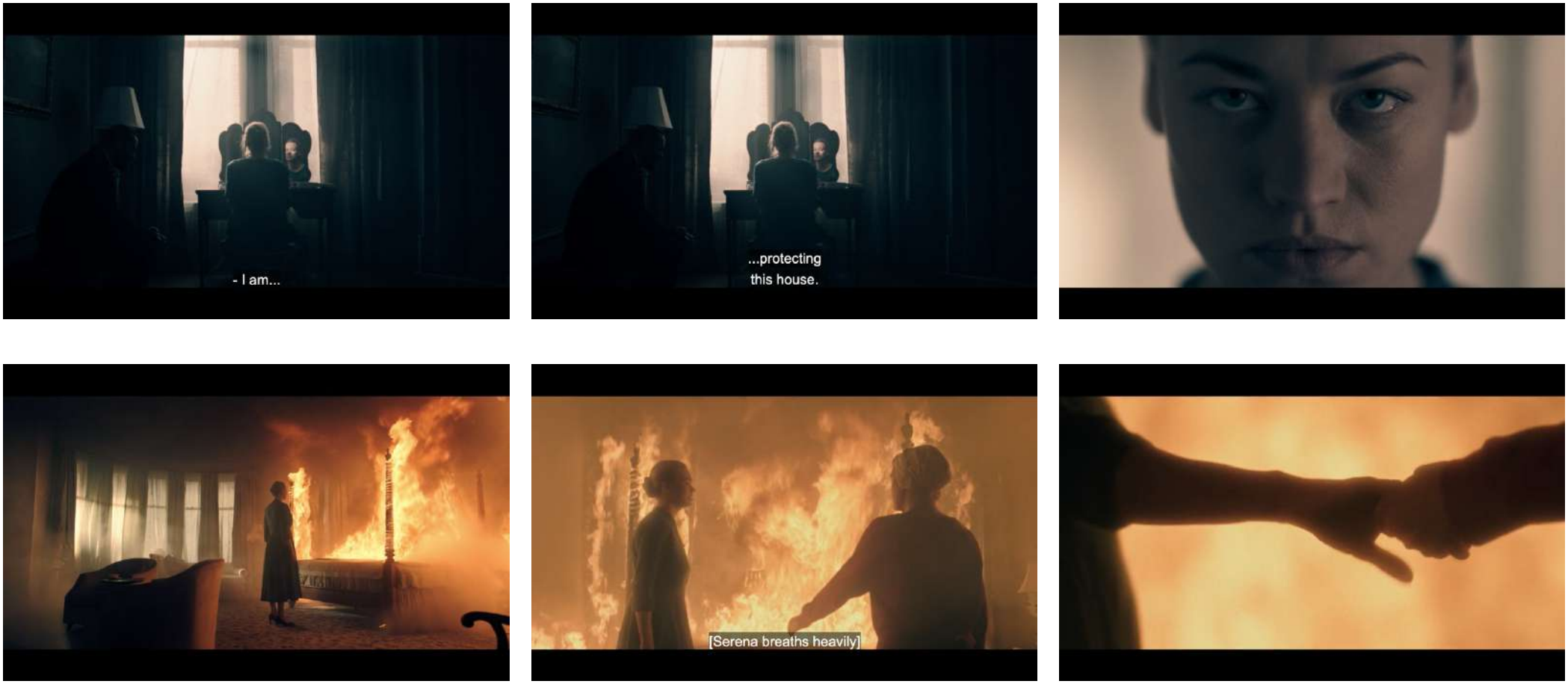

Figure 7. Serena reacts to her husband's words by burning down their home. She is saved by June.

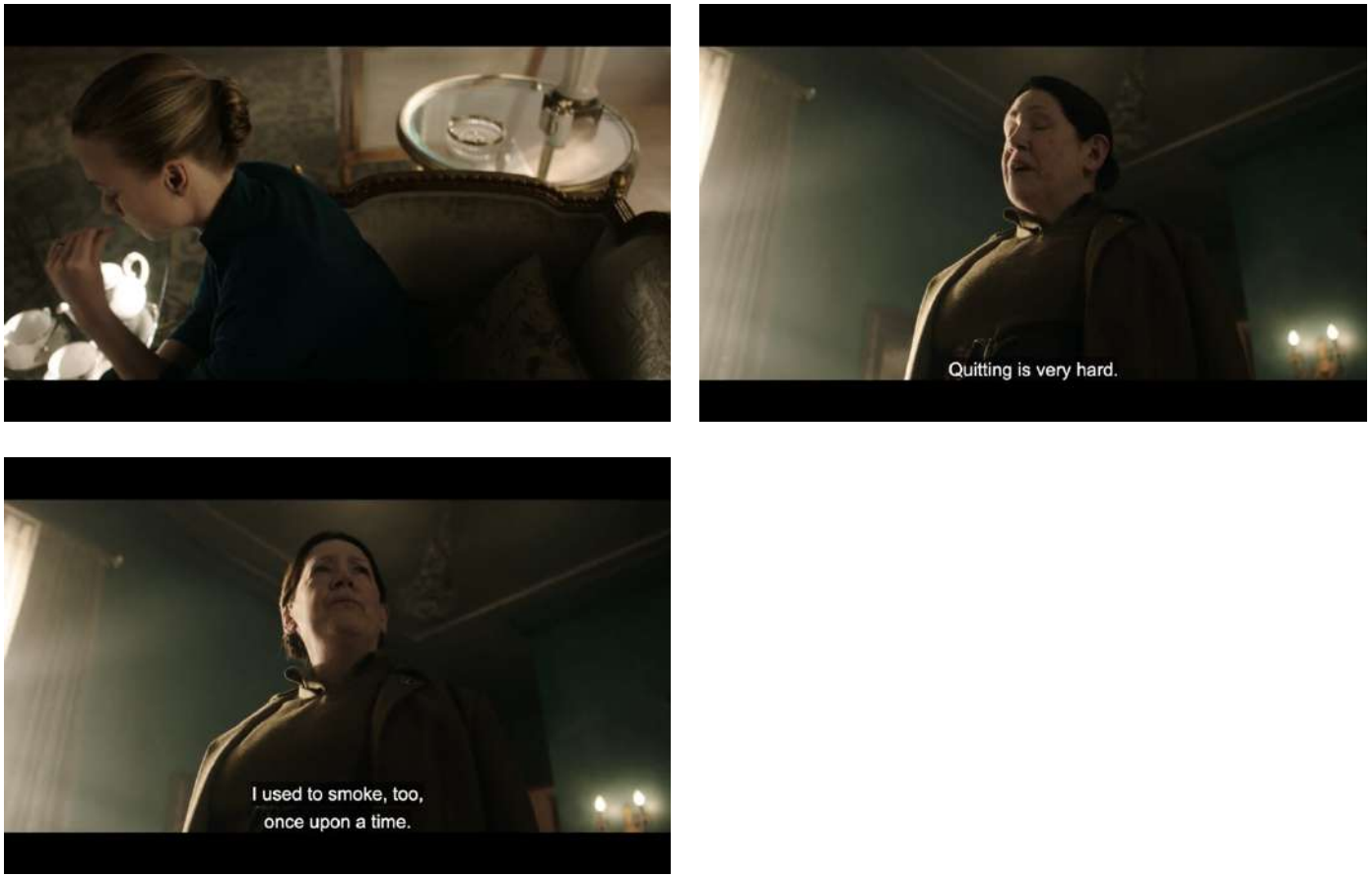

Figure 8. Serena bites her nails because she is attempting to quit smoking.

Figure 9. June steps out of line and Serena slaps Rita because she cannot slap June.

Figure 10. Serena answers Aunt Lydia's questions in place of June.

Figure 11. June and the Waterfords performing their first Ceremony.

Figure 12. Janine giving birth with Mrs. Putnam.

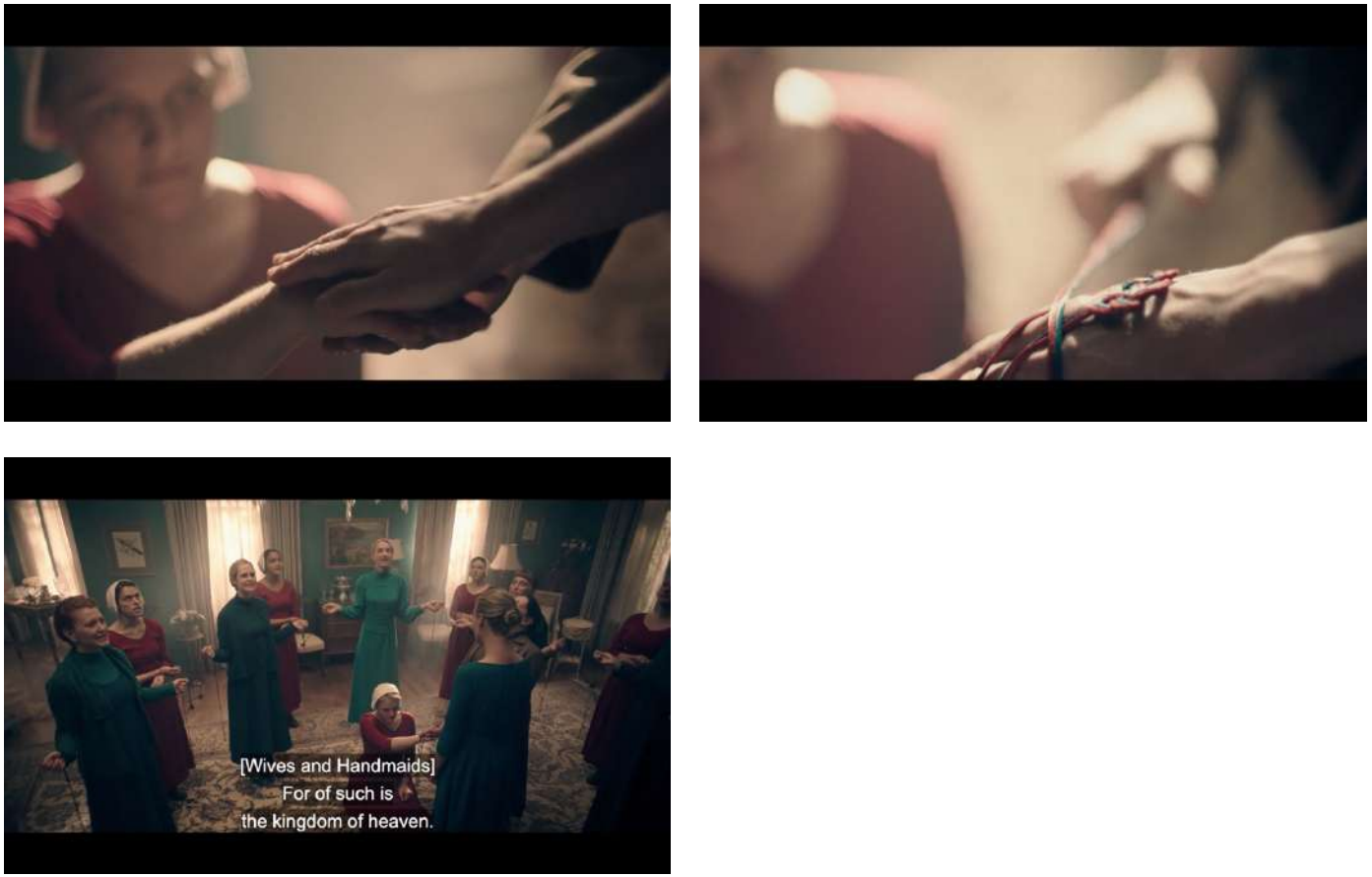

Figure 13. June and Serena are united in a bonding ceremony.

Figure 14. Serena allows June to hold the Putnam baby, staring at her longingly.

Figure 15. Serena opens up to June but reacts violently when finding out June is not pregnant.

Figure 16. Serena antagonizes June but, once it is revealed she is pregnant, she kisses her forehead and blesses her.

Figure 17. June wakes up next to Serena in the hospital.

Figure 18. June allows Serena to feel their baby move.

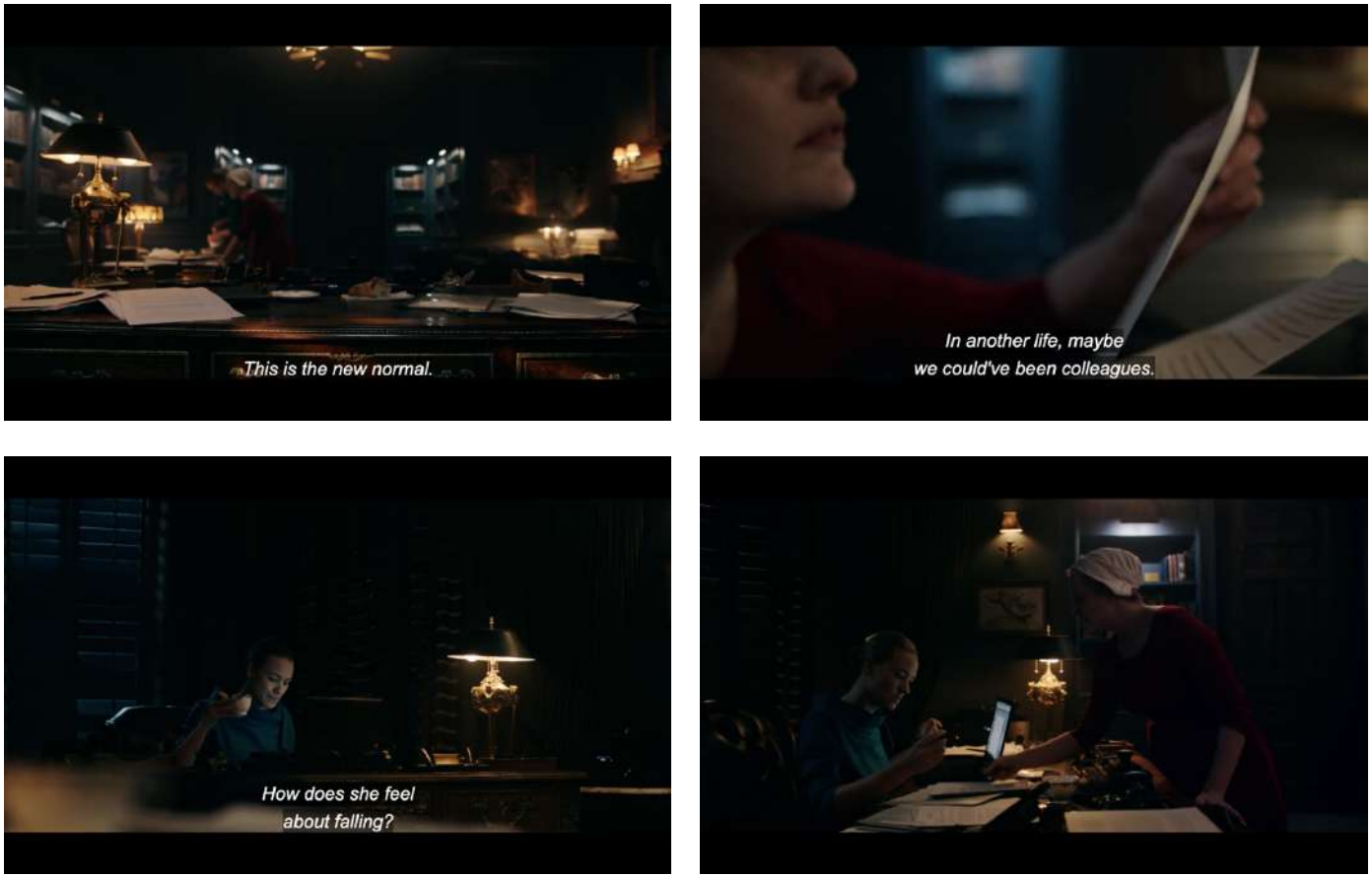

Figure 19. June and Serena write together.

Figure 20. Serena shows her cut off finger to June and is comforted by her.

Figure 21. Serena catches June attempting an escape with Nichole. She lets them go.

Figure 22. June tries to help Serena give birth, but she reacts violently due to stress. June leaves.

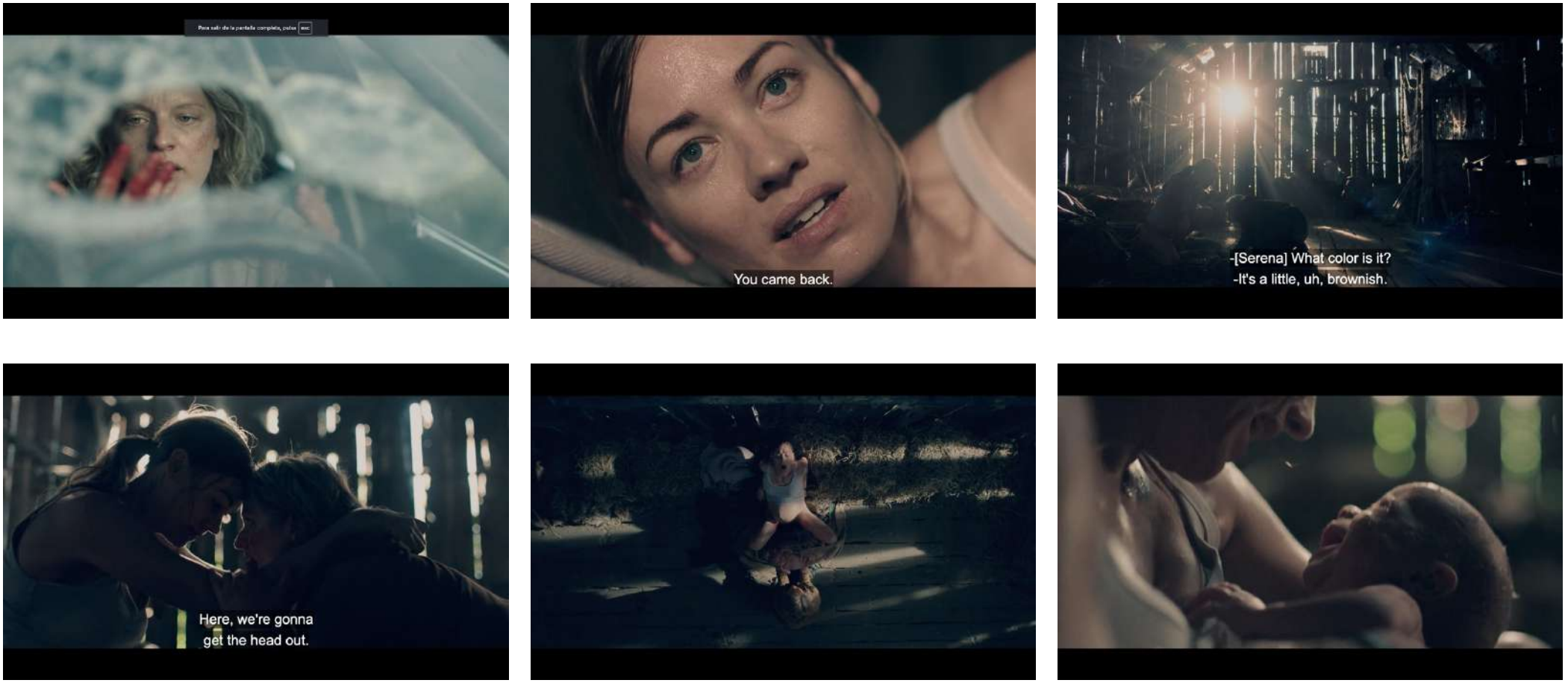

Figure 23. June returns and helps Serena give birth.

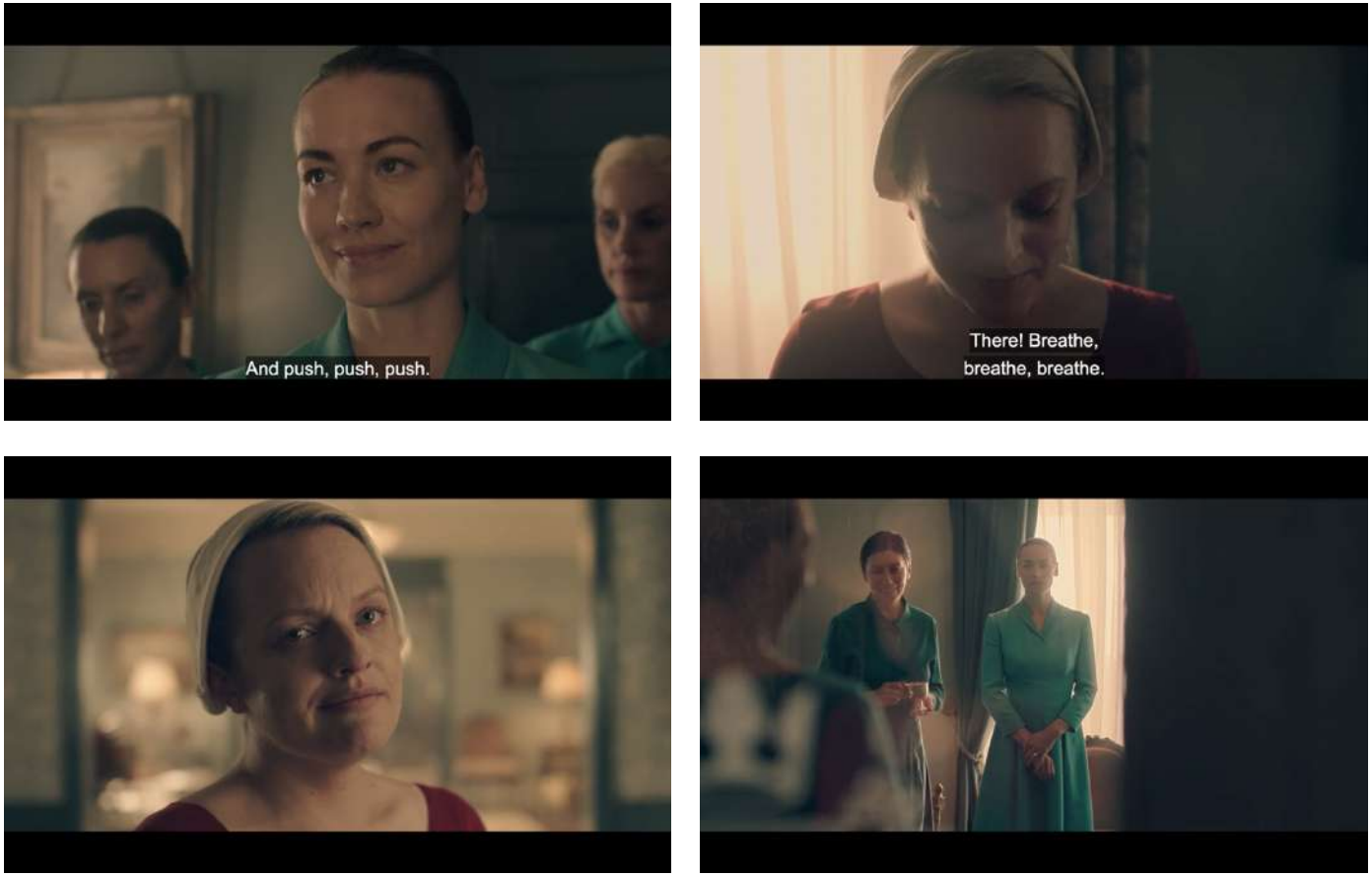

Figure 24. First, June and Serena acknowledge the absurdity of Gilead's traditions. Later, Serena sympathizes with the Handmaid's death through childbirth.

Figure 25. After giving birth, Serena and June attempt to even out their relationship.

Figure 26. When June insists on taking Serena to the hospital, Serena refuses and attempts to give June her baby.

Figure 27. June is almost convinced, but refuses to let Serena die and follow Gilead's ideals of sacrifice for the Child, saving her life.

Figure 28. June and Serena find each other again on the refugee train.

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