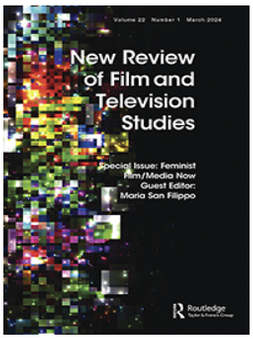

New Review of Film and Television Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfts20

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To cite this article: Shelley Cobb (2024) Adaptation, authorship and the critical conversations of *Little Fires Everywhere*, New Review of Film and Television Studies, 22:1, 316-336, DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2023.2264711

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2264711

Published online: 28 Feb 2024.

NEW REVIEW OF FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES
2024, VOL. 22, NO. 1, 316–336
https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2264711

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Adaptation, authorship and the critical conversations of *Little Fires Everywhere*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for an understanding of contemporary women's television as a twenty-first century iteration of Lauren Berlant's concept of the 'intimate public' of femininity, by analysing how the production, content, and reception of *Little Fires Everywhere* participate in the high visibility of popular feminism by invoking intersectionality and women's empowerment. It does this first through the collective and collaborative female authorship of the television adaptation, which is discursively constructed as a critical conversation and an intersectional success; second, through the casting of Washington as a character who in the adapted novel is not Black, heightening the tensions of class, race, and motherhood and making Mia the voice of an intersectional critic of white feminism; and third, through the historical distance of its setting in the 1990s, which is often understood in the reception of the show as uncomfortably wearing its contemporary (i.e. popular feminist) politics.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 23 September 2023; Accepted 23 September 2023

KEYWORDS Popular feminism; authorship; adaptation; melodrama; intersectionality; postfeminism

I. 'If you wanna talk, let's talk'

In the fourth episode of *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), Elena Robinson (Reese Witherspoon) asks Mia Warren (Kerry Washington), 'Are we? Friends?'. The short conversation that follows is full of implied accusations, uneasy deflections, and awkward assertions that invoke an intimacy between them that they simultaneously deny. Throughout the series their conversations work in this way; a veiled accusation by one is nervily deflected by the other and they end with a stilted, and mostly unspoken, acceptance of their dissimilitude: journalist and artist, landlord and tenant, upper middle class and working class, employer and house manager, white and Black. They are, as Mia makes emphatically clear in a scene I will return to, *not friends* even as these tête-à-têtes are almost

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always about the one thing they have in common: motherhood. However, throughout the series' eight episodes they talk to each other and about each other a lot, as friends might do, and it is in these conversations that the show invokes its collective female authorship and its status as an adaptation. I have previously argued for 'conversation' as a feminist metaphor for analysing adaptation and women's authorship in film (Cobb 2015) and make the case here that it is also productive for television adaptations of women's novels made by women showrunners/producers that are part of what has been called a 'golden age of women's television' (Perkins and Schreiber 2019, 919).[1] At the same time the metaphor invokes Lauren Berlant's concept of an 'intimate public of femininity', in which 'women's culture ... is distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief' (Berlant 2008, viii). I will draw on her work to suggest that *LFE* and other shows of this 'golden age' create a televisual intimate public of femininity that responds to the need for revelation and relief in the twenty-first century.

In her book *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Berlant argues that, 'gender-marked tests of women's popular culture cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real – social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life' (4) and that they 'thrive in *proximity* to the political, occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough' (x). Katja Kanzler, in her analysis of *The Good Wife* (2009–15), argues that as a space that is, at best, ambivalent about politics and foregrounds feeling, the intimate public of femininity is particularly useful for articulating postfeminist media culture's emphasis on the successful individual woman who must navigate her position in the neoliberal public sphere while committing herself to hegemonic femininity in her personal life (4). I very much agree, but I would argue also that television shows like *Big Little Lies* (2017–19), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-19), *Girls* (2012-17), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present) and other dramas, dramedies, and comedies considered part of the current golden age of women's television 'cultivate fantasies of vague belonging' for the twenty-first century as they navigate the neoliberalism, (post-2008 crash) austerity, right-wing populism, popular misogyny, and post-post-feminism of the 2010s America in which their plots and *mise-en-scene* are situated.[2] As products of this economically insecure and politically tumultuous context, they attempt to alleviate what is hard to manage in the lived real by invoking tropes of popular feminism as the protagonists resist patriarchal norms (e.g. heterosexuality; the nuclear family) within narratives

that are driven by female oppression (e.g. limits of idealised femininity; domestic abuse) and propound solidarity amongst women in their representation of (often racially diverse) female friendships (Havas 2022, 7).

As such, I agree with Perkins and Schreiber (2019) that the shows of this golden age circulate within the 'feedback loop' of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018, 10) by virtue of the visibility of their female showrunners/producers, their female-centred stories, and the female stars cast in these shows, all of which are referenced in the critical reception as indicators of a 'feminist sensibility' (Ford 2019). Collectively they create what I would call an intimate public of 'feminist-femininity' that manifests as images of sisterhood (both on and off screen), resistance to and triumphs over an often-individualised patriarchy, and the power of love (romantic and otherwise), all the while privileging sentimentality and feeling over the political. In their introduction to their special edition, Perkins and Schreiber note that contemporary television's expression of popular feminism in these shows has been underexamined. This article seeks to redress that by analysing how the production, content, and reception of *Little Fires Everywhere* participate in the high visibility of popular feminism by invoking intersectionality and women's empowerment. It does this first through the collective and collaborative female authorship of the television adaptation, which is discursively constructed as a critical conversation and an intersectional success; second, through the casting of Washington as a character who in the adapted novel is not Black, heightening the tensions of class, race, and motherhood and making Mia the voice of an intersectional critic of white feminism; and third, through the historical distance of its setting in the 1990s, which is often understood in the reception of the show as uncomfortably wearing its contemporary (i.e. popular feminist) politics.

A melodrama, the series *Little Fires Everywhere* largely follows the plot of the novel, set in 1997, as it is centered around Elena and Mia and a custody case over a baby left at a fire station. The most significant adaptations are the casting of Black women to play Mia Warren and her daughter Pearl and making Elena's daughter Izzy lesbian. Mia is an artist and she and Pearl move towns regularly after a few months when a project is complete. They arrive in Shaker Hieghts, Ohio, a planned community with integrationist policies since the 1950s, that is an economically mixed suburb of Cleveland, planning to stay for a year. Elena Richardson has lived in Shaker Heights all her life. Her parents were part of the original planning of the town and its liberal ethos, which she likes to mention as much as she can, especially when her daughter Lexie's Black boyfriend or Pearl are around. Elena is a part-time reporter for the local paper and lives in the large house she grew up in with her lawyer husband and their four teenage children. She rents a duplex to the Warrens and offers Mia a job being her 'house helper', which the latter initially rejects. At her part-time job, Mia meets Bebe who tells her that

several months before when she was destitute and unwell in the middle of winter, she left her baby daughter whom she could not feed at a fire station, afraid that she might be deported if she asked for help. Mia sympathises with her because she ran away while pregnant with Pearl when she decided she couldn't give her up to the couple who hired her to be the surrogate mother. Pearl has becomes friends with Elena's son Moody and his siblings, spending much of her time at Elena's house, and Mia takes the housekeeping job at Elena's because she is concerned by Pearl's fascination with the Richardsons and their affluence. At the same time, Elena's daughter Izzy, who aspires to be an artist and offends her mother's sensibilities of proper behaviour by cutting her hair and getting into trouble at school, becomes fascinated with Mia and works as her assistant. Izzy argues with Elena regularly, and they avoid discussing Izzy's sexuality. At a birthday party for the adopted baby of a friend of Elena's, Mia takes photographs and discovers the baby is Bebe's whom she tells, and the latter crashes the party to try to see her daughter. Elena suspects that Mia was the one who informed Bebe, which has resulted in a high profile custody case with the adoptive parents. Elena become obsessed with exposing Mia, fires her, and using her journalistic contacts, finds out about Pearl's origins and threatens to tell Pearl. Finding out Mia has left, Izzy runs away after she tells Elena she hates her and Elena says the same to Izzy. Disgusted by their mother, Lexie and her brothers set the Richardson house on fire with Elena still in it.

II. The popular feminist politics of visibility and women's television authorship

LFE and many of the other shows in the recent rise in women's television evidence their proximity to the political, as Berlant puts it, through their production personnel and the media attention paid to their various female authors (the showrunners, star-producers, directors, script writers, and writers of the adapted source) who circulate within what Banet-Weiser calls the '*economies* of visibility' of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018, 23), a visibility that in and of itself assumes the status of the political. The authors are made visible in the networked space of entertainment magazines, culture sections of newspapers, women's magazine, award nominations and shows, interviews with stars and showrunners, reviews in newspapers, social media accounts for the show or of the stars, and social media buzz by viewers and across multiple media platforms. During a period of heightened, critical attention to the male-domination of the film and television industries that surged with the rise of celebrity feminism and which increased after #MeToo (Brannon Donoghue 2020), shows like *Big Little Lies* are often lauded by critics and cultural reporters as feminist television (Adegoke 2019), and interviews with the authors (or

stars) will often mention the individual woman's identity as a feminist (Alcorn 2017). Even as he wrote all seven scripts, David E. Kelly attempted to further burnish *BLL*'s credentials as 'women's television' by hiring director Andrea Arnold for the post-#MeToo second season. As Perkins and Schreiber suggest, 'the more visible [these women] become the more self-evident the feminist content of their work is made to appear' (2019, 920). Still, this kind of popular feminist visibility, or what Leigh Goldstein and Meenasarani Linde Murugan call 'Hollywood feminism', can fail spectacularly as in the case of Arnold and *BLL* discussed in Sarah Smyth's article for this special edition. Other shows have greater success in bringing in women behind the scenes such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, which has had five women directors nominated for Emmy awards, and *Queen Sugar* (2016–22), created and run by Ava DuVernay, which for seven seasons has employed only women directors. On its debut, 'the number of first-time women directors of episodic television almost tripled' (Williams 2019, 1043).

Like *LFE*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Queen Sugar* are adapted from a novel by a woman author. Writers and directors of these shows include significant numbers of women, and for the latter especially women of colour. Shows whose media visibility highlight their collective female and, in several cases, racially diverse authorship are signalling their Hollywood feminist credentials, even as the words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are never used (Goldstein and Murugan 2022, 104). By resisting the tradition of the male-dominated writers' room and projecting an image of sisterhood (encompassing showrunner, writers and directors) that has long appealed to both postfeminist and popular feminist media cultures (Winch 2013), the production of these shows troubles the cultural impulse to aggrandize the often-masculine individual showrunner who has auteur-like status, such as David Simon and Ryan Murphy Henderson, 2011. This is particularly true for *Little Fires Everywhere* and its mediated discourses of collective and diverse authorship that also includes the novel's author and the star-producers. Reese Witherspoon and Hello Sunshine producer Lauren Neustadter found the book before publication and Witherspoon set it as her book club's September 2017 pick, making it an instant bestseller (Andreeva 2018). Witherspoon brought the book to Kerry Washington and her production company Simpson Street. The two exec-producers brought on Liz Tigelaar as showrunner and executive-producer, and Pilar Savone as executive-producer overseeing production. Director Lynn Shelton and Neustadter were also executive producers, making the list of six execs all women. Author of the novel Celeste Ng joined script writers Shannon Huston, Rosa Handelman, and Harris Danow as producers. The writers room also included Nancy Won, Raamla Mohamed, Attica Locke, and Amy Talkington. Of those eight writers five are women of colour, as is Nzingha Stewart who directed

two episodes alongside Shelton and Michael Weaver. Weaver and Danow are the only men in this collective group of authors.

In media articles published months before the show aired, the production of the adaptation was characterised as a collaborative process from its beginning when Witherspoon asked Washington to co-produce and co-star as a partner with whom she could have 'many conversations' and share 'equal responsibility and leadership' (Turchiano 2020). Moreover, though initial reports suggested that showrunner Tigelaar had written all the episodes (Andreeva 2018), she made diversity a priority of their writers' room, characterising it as a place of 'challenging' conversation and dialogue. She says in an interview: 'The story is about four mothers, two are white women, one's a black woman, and one is a Chinese immigrant woman. And I knew that I had to have people in the room who could speak to that experience with firsthand knowledge' (Bentley 2020). The story that Tigelaar refers to here is specific to the television adaptation as she includes a Black mother in her list who, as noted above, is white or unraced in the novel. Ng has said in many interviews that she wanted to make Mia a woman of colour in the novel, but 'I didn't feel like I was the person who could bring a Black or Latina woman's experience to life . . . I thought of her as a white character, but still exploring those larger issues of power' (Petersen 2020). The conviction that writers cannot necessarily tell the story of someone who comes from a different background and identity has been the subject of much media debate about cultural appropriation in popular culture (Shapiro 2019). We can infer that in Tigelaar's desire for writers with first-hand knowledge, Ng's concerns transferred to *LFE*'s writers' room when Washington was cast as Mia and then the other writers of color were brought onto the team. Tigelaar and the star-producers pre-emptively push back against any accusations of cultural appropriation by repeatedly claiming authenticity for the adaptation by referring to the diversity of the writing and production team and their commitment to conversations 'that were challenging and hard and painful and revealing' (Bentley 2020).

The visibility of *LFE's* writers' room puts the show in proximity to the political through an image of intersectional sisterhood that situates it in the golden age of women's television and as part of the rise of women showrunners, writers, and directors that have been lauded as 'revolutionising television' ('Screen Queens' 2019). Though the interviews with members of the production team do not use the word intersectionality, some reviews of the show do as they critique the character of Elena for her white feminism. I consider the textual representation of (white/post/popular) feminism below, but I want to make the important point now that it is linked to the authorship of the show through Witherspoon as star-producer. One of many celebrities who publicly declared her feminism in 2014, Witherspoon started her production company Hello

Sunshine in 2016, which also curates her book club; its website declares that it 'puts women at the center of every story' (Hello Sunshine). In the media discourse on *LFE*, her choice to bring Washington on board as co-star/producer was the catalyst that culminated in challenging conversations of collective authorship. Tigelaar's description of the writers' room as one that not only includes women of color but also mothers and immigrants and her declaration that she found 'the perfect guy who was going to thrive in an all-female room' constructs a conversation in which all views and positions are equal (Bentley 2020). It then evokes a kind of 'happy diversity' version of intersectionality, in which, as (Sara Ahmed 2012) has shown, 'the feminist of color critique is obscured. All differences matter under this view' (14). Characterised as a diverse room of writers marked by and sympathetic to femininity, the discursive authorship of the show functions 'as a critical chorus' (Berlant 2008, x) of the typical masculine writers' room, effecting a 'conceptual recalibration' of the room that is 'achievement enough' and profitable within the visibility of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser). As such the authorial discourse of *LFE* participates in and contributes to an *intimate public of feminist-femininity* that in return sanctions the television show as an authentic adaptation of the novel and, importantly for this article, the adapters as authentic translators of Mia into a Black woman.

Berlant makes it clear that many marginalised women will not feel seen as an audience member for women's culture even as it generates a desire to belong. As such, marginalised (or 'minoritised') authors who write in response to the call of the intimate public of femininity often create 'countersentimental narratives' that are 'resistant' and 'lacerated with ambivalence' (55). *Little Fires Everywhere* is this kind of countersentimental novel from an Asian-American woman writer which is focused on the stories of four women for whom motherhood is the embodiment of the female complaint and sisterhood is made impossible by class and racial difference. The novel articulates a refusal of sentimental belonging or relief from the 'impacts of living as a woman in the world' (Berlant 2008, x) by pitting the women against each other. In many interviews Ng has said that she wanted her readers' affinities to be pulled and then undermined, forcing them to see that characters they thought were good or bad are much more complicated and not meant to be fully sympathetic (Frederick 2020; Petersen 2020; Li 2020): 'Countersentimental texts', Berlant argues, 'withdraw from the contract that presumes consent with the conventionally desired outcomes of identification and compassion' (Berlant 2008, 56). I suggest that the show retains the novel's countersentimentality by sharpening the tensions between Mia and Elena through their racial difference, making a critique of white feminism and denying the audience any final images of sisterhood, intersectional or not.

III. White feminism, intersectionality and women's culture

At the same time, the collective and diverse authorship of the show also inevitably reinforces Witherspoon as a high-profile feminist who uses her privileges of white femininity for good, making her the 'moral compass of Hollywood' (Daum 2019). In this way, she is much like Akane Kanai's everyday feminists for whom 'the pursuit of an intersectional feminist identity may be entangled with desires and demands for authenticity and individual perfection, via the impetus to highlight or "platform" those who are deemed underrepresented within popular feminism' (Kanai 2020, 26). Witherspoon's own pursuit of authenticity and individual perfection has been at the core of her celebrity status for nearly three decades. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's description of her as a postfeminist star – 'both (conventionally) feminine and feminist, traditional and modern, the girl-next-door and a powerhouse-achiever' (2011, 130) – is still largely applicable to her current identity, even as she has continually adapted to the shifting cultural politics of 1990s third-wave feminism, 2000s postfeminist 'girl world' and 2010s popular feminism. Most importantly, she is a celebrity who has long stated her need to do something that *matters* (Karlyn 2011, 131), and it is in the context of popular feminism and the #MeToo movement that her version of white feminist-feminine celebrity gives her the power to platform underrepresented women.

As the star of *Legally Blonde* (Luketic 2001) and the producer of shows in this golden age of women's television like *Big Little Lies*, *The Morning Show* (2019-present) and *Little Fires Everywhere*, Witherspoon particularly embodies the intergenerational politics of Hollywood feminism and its persistent whiteness, which manifests on screen as a combination of postfeminist tropes and popular feminist issues (while feminism as a political identity remains absent).[3] Goldstein and Murugan argue that Hollywood feminism 'encourages girls and women to think of themselves not as leaders but as lead characters … whose actions drive the plots of the narratives of their own lives … elid[ing] any difference between feminism and women's culture' (2022, 106). By narrating an intimate public of women's culture, widely watched women's television shows that are highly praised (and often highly critiqued) come to stand in for women's issues, such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* and the economic precarity of millennial women (Kaklamanidou and Tally 2014) or *Big Little Lies* and the visibility of #MeToo (Bautista 2023). They do so by concluding their narratives through affective solutions and recalibrating feminist issues into personal ones. The series finale of *Girls* is a detailed lesson in Berlant's concept of the female complaint ('women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking') in which Hannah gets out of her depression spiral brought on by her baby who won't breastfeed by telling

a teenage girl to listen to her mother because mothers 'take care of you forever even if it means endless endless pain'. The episode ends on a maternal sentimental image of her holding her breastfeeding baby. Both seasons of *Big Little Lies* end in sentimentalised female and feminist solidarity, 'staging a competing set of fantasies' (Alsop 2019, 1031): the first concludes with the five women and their children happily together, lounging and playing on the beach, after the death of the abusive husband, and the second concludes with Bonnie (the one who pushed the abuser to his death and the only Black woman) entering the police station to confess, accompanied by the other four women in a performance of solidarity. Motherhood (Lagerway 2016) and female friendship (Winch 2013) are two key tropes of postfeminist media culture that provide relief from the two shows' overarching storylines that evoke their respective feminist issues of sexual subjectivity and domestic abuse that have acquired new visibility within mediated popular feminism.

The imbrication of their popular feminist and postfeminist sensibilities exemplifies the ways contemporary women's television shows construct an intimate public of feminist-femininity that invites their audiences to feel 'seen' in the shared recognition of a woman's suffering in the contemporary world. And yet, what is seen on screen is spectacularly white. Even in quality feminist television shows with casts that include women of colour – *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Big Little Lies* – the white women protagonists take centre stage and the 'women of colour . . . serve as second fiddles in dramatizing the white women's solidarity' (Kim 2022, 1741). For *Little Fires Everywhere*, this creates some tension then between the image of challenging-conversational sisterhood in authorship and impossible sisterhood on screen. Goldstein and Meenasarani suggest that this gap is bridged by the creators' pedagogic intent for the show to 'help [white women] viewers recognize their status as that which is dominant in some social hierarchies and to attend to some of the typical ways that white women as a social group evade or disavow that knowledge' (2022, 113). They argue that the show ultimately frames whiteness as white fragility, positioning the white women audience as observers of Elena's and the other white women's fragility and problematic relationship to women of other races, suggesting that it is possible to read *LFE* and other shows (*The Morning Show*, *The Good Fight* (2017-22), and *Mrs. America* (2020)) as providing 'instruction . . . in order to teach a target audience of white bourgeois women how to be better versions of themselves, where 'better' is interpreted as meaning 'less racist' and 'less homophobic' (104). Better, arguably, like Witherspoon who uses the power of her celebrity whiteness for the good of other women. And yet, the show turns her celebrity image on its head as Elena is a privileged white woman who intends to do good but whose unfailing commitment to propriety ends up

causing only pain and anger. The duality of Witherspoon/Elena invites the (white women) audience into the intimate public of feminist-femininity by allowing them to simultaneously identify with the star and disavow the character.

IV. Mammies, motherhood and difficult conversations

A key scene early on in episode one establishes for the audience the blind spots that Elena has and invites the viewer to see themselves as 'better' than her. In the novel, Elena's sense of propriety is structured by class. Her town of Shaker Heights is known for its intentional integration started in the 1950s and many secondary characters are Asian American and Black, including the boyfriend of Elena's eldest daughter. As noted above, Mia is assumed white, and the TV show's casting of Washington raises the stakes of the class difference between the women. Elena calls the police to tell them there is an 'African-American woman, I think' living in her car in a parking lot, and she 'wouldn't want anything bad to happen'. Very soon after, Mia is looking to rent a duplex from Elena, and it's only when Elena sees Mia's car that she realises whom she had reported earlier. A look of guilt appears on her face, and she immediately agrees to the rental. Not long after, she runs into Mia leaving her part-time job at a Chinese restaurant and offers her work in the Richardson's house, 'light cleaning, a little laundry, maybe cook dinner', to which Mia replies 'like – to be your maid'. Disconcerted, Elena corrects herself and the alternating over the shoulder shots increase the tension as she tries the words 'housekeeper', 'house helper', and then finally, 'house manager' to which Mia icily declines. With both women still on screen, Elena's voiceover says, 'do you think it was offensive' to her husband, whom we see when the screen cuts to their bathroom where they get ready for bed. He says 'well . . . housekeeper is loaded'. Defensively she replies 'you mean racist. Isn't it more racist not to give her the job due to her race?'. Her husband patronisingly tells her she has the best intentions and a big heart but, again, guilt, and a bit of confusion, play out on her face, inviting the audience to see the lesson she's supposed to learn, but will not.

The casting of Washington makes this scene possible, as Elena's call to the police is not in the novel. It briefly notes that Mr. and Mrs. Richardson had thought Mia and Pearl who had moved into their rental were 'nice enough' (Ng 2017, 8). The invitation to work in the Richardson home is in the book. Elena offers it with good 'intentions' to help Mia with money but it is not, of course, loaded with racist undertones. As I have argued elsewhere, signs of authorship and the subversive potential in adaptations for women filmmakers are asserted in these moments of difference and addition. And it is in scenes like this one, where the series' racial diversity of its mostly women authorial team and the constant referencing of the difficult conversations

they had are made visible, directly linking representation and difference to authorship in the adaptation process. Mia's use of the word 'maid' in a dismissive tone and the conversation between the Richardsons suggest that one of the conversations the writing team had to have was about the long history of cultural representations of the benevolent Mammy/maid. Their voicing of a critique of this racist and sexist figure in the scenes above[4] invokes the many critical race studies' interrogations of stereotypes of Black women on screen (Bogle (2016), Cheers (2018), Wallace-Sanders (2008), and Mcyela (2007)). The spectre of the mammy is raised in the scene above when Mia insists on using the word 'maid' to make it clear to Elena, as a wealthy white woman, what role she is expecting of a Black woman to whom she offers domestic work. Mia later takes the job because she's concerned about how much time Pearl spends in the Richardson's house. Her presence in the house briefly generates a connection between them over motherhood, offering a moment of interracial intimacy of feminist-femininity for the audience.

Elena holds a book club at her house with her women friends of Shaker Heights. At the insistence of one, Betsy, who is a gynaecologist, they discuss *The Vagina Monologues*. Having to speak about intimate body parts and experiences makes the others very uncomfortable. Mia, who is not a part of the group but in the background as 'house helper', takes over leading and 'prods the women to reflect on their discomfort in using words like "vagina", and how that discomfort is indicative of their formation in a patriarchal culture that casts "the feminine" in general as abject and motherhood in particular as a subject unworthy of discussion or dramatization' (Goldstein and Murugan, 2022, 112). Clearly in the pedagogical mode, the scene ends with the women assenting to Mia's point of view, having learnt their lesson to be better at being women. The episode returns to the scene later after the guests have left, and Mia confesses to Elena that she lied about her job reference. She adds, 'a lot of landlords when they see a single black mom, they don't want to rent to me. But you did, because you're different, and I should have seen that'. They have a glass of wine, and later in the episode they are tipsy, sharing feelings and desires about womanhood and motherhood. Elena confesses that she knows Izzy doesn't like her, the anguish visible on her face. Sympathetic, Mia shares her own fears, and the scene is silent for a moment while they sit in the emotional aftermath. Also an addition by the writers of the series, this interaction between them encapsulates a fantasy of women's culture – that femininity, in this instance via motherhood, is the thing that brings different women together in sisterhood and intimacy. But in this countersentimental melodrama, the intimacy doesn't last, and their bonding in the scene breaks, expressed through Mia's face, when she finds out that Pearl went to Elena for help but not to her. Elena's description of her benevolence toward Pearl seems to keep her from noticing Mia's reaction. The

possibility of intimacy between the two women is quickly and irrevocably quashed.

V. Black women, white women, and the impossibility of intimacy

Goldstein and Meenasarani argue that the series' pedagogical approach to its audience is found in the 'addition of non-normative leads' (like Mia and Pearl) as a critical point of view and in the 'citation of canonical women's culture' (2022, 110). They suggest that the show invites the audience to associate Elena with the second Mrs. Danvers of *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940) as she watches her house on fire in the opening scene, encouraging the audience to at first identify with Elena as a victim and then to see her as the villain. Borrowing their approach, I want to argue that the series' intertextuality of classic women's culture most strongly evokes *Imitation of Life*, Fannie Hurst's popular 1933 novel. Its story of a white woman, her Black maid/companion, and their daughters was adapted by classical Hollywood twice (Stahl 1934 and Sirk 1959). Berlant discusses all *Imitation* texts in relation to the intimate public of femininity and the ways popular women's culture 'involve[s] mobilizing a fantasy scene of collective desire, *instruction*, and identification' (emphasis mine, 21). *Imitation*'s narrative attempts to include Black women into the feeling and representation of feminine belonging through the central plot of a white woman (Lara), a single mother pursuing economic success, who takes in a Black woman (Annie), also a single mother, to do the domestic labour. Their relationship quickly moves beyond employment and into the realm of an apparent sisterly companionship that is partly built on the difficulties they have with their daughters. Susie is jealous of her mother Lara's success and Sarah Jane, who can pass as white, resents her Annie's dark-skin and disowns her. Annie dies 'from heartbreak effectively and melodramatically signal[ing] the end of this experiment in a female refunctioning of the national public sphere' (Berlant 2008, 113). Douglas Sirk's 1959 version of *Imitation* and its invitation into this cross-racial intimate public of femininity is exposed for the fantasy that it is in the end when Annie becomes ill, and Lara learns her friend had a whole life in the Black community she never knew about, because, Annie says, 'You never asked, Miss Lara'. Even as the film ends with the return of Annie's daughter and her inclusion into Lara's white family, it is this final truth about Lara – that she was a woman who only ever understood her companion as a secondary player to her leading role in the narrative of her own life – which echoes in the representation of white women who have mammies and maids and other forms of Black female companions in the films of the 20th and 21st century women's culture, from *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939) to *The Help* (Taylor 2011). Elena is a descendent of this figure for a popular feminist audience who want to believe they are nothing like her.

Even so, the entanglement of race, female friendship, motherhood, women's aspirations, and melodrama resonate across the sixty years between these two screen adaptations and the series also offers an invitation into the sentimental feminine sphere in the book club scene in episode two. The intimate bonding over motherhood presents a white feminist fantasy of cross-racial and cross-class sisterhood, but that bubble is quickly burst and the ongoing underlying tension between the two women comes to a head when Elena's white and class privilege is called out by Mia in episode four. That episode starts with the scene discussed at the beginning of this article, in which Elena is suspicious of Mia calling her a friend because she believes she was involved in Bebe showing up at Linda's baby shower, screaming for the baby she abandoned. After her suspicions are confirmed, Elena confronts Mia who is in the Richardson's kitchen cleaning and accuses both Bebe and Mia of being 'terrible mothers' and making bad choices. The self-control that Mia has held when around Elena breaks and the scene plays out in the heightened mode of melodrama:

> M – You didn't make good choices! You had good choices. Options, that being rich and white and entitled give you.
>
> E – That's the difference between you and me. I would never make this about race.
>
> M – Elena, you made this about race when you stood out there on the street and begged me to be your maid.
>
> E – This is not working out. I think this is gonna be your last day.
>
> M – You think?!?. . .
>
> E – I thought we were friends . . .
>
> M – White women always want to be friends with their maid. I was not your maid, Elena. And I was *never* your friend.

Anger is not allowed, or at least not for very long, in the conversations of sentimental women's culture in melodramas like *Imitation of Life* and *Big Little Lies* that consecrate the fantasy of female friendship, which act as a 'safety valve for [the] surplus female rage and desire' of the female complaint (Berlant 1988, 245).[5] Any revelations or relief are found in feminine intimacy and the feeling of belonging, however fleeting, which exists only in 'proximity to the political' (Berlant 2008, x). I have associated Berlant's intimate public of femininity with Banet-Weiser's popular feminisms through my suggestion of a contemporary televisual intimate public of *feminist-femininity* that 'cultivate[s] fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real' through representations of sisterhood, individual triumph, and feminine love. And yet, Washington's

performance makes Mia's anger clear. Her rebuke of Elena stands out in contemporary women's culture for its expression of 'eloquent rage' (Cooper 2018) at her boss and landlord's ignorant, racist privilege. They become only further entrenched in their opposition to each other in the last four episodes as the custody battle plays out. In the end, Elena tells Pearl about her biological father. Though Pearl is angry, she leaves Shaker behind with her mother to meet the grandparents she never knew. As part of a longer history of women's culture, *LFE* recognises that 'there is no imaginable space in [white] America, not even in the most benign white woman's house, where [the Black woman] will see relief from the body's burden' (Berlant). Unlike Sarah Jane who returns to Lara's house, the final image of Pearl is of her knocking on her grandparents' door while her mother waits in the car. In this way, Mia and Pearl are allowed the hope of a sentimental ending but one that rejects the fantasy of intersectional belonging so prevalent in the popular feminism of contemporary women's television.

VI. 'I just wonder if you ever look back at your life and have regrets': postfeminism, popular feminism and reflective nostalgia

The tepid review of *Little Fires Everywhere* in the *New York Times* begins as many of the reviews do by pointing out that it is set in the late 1990s and that the script, the soundtrack, and the visuals 'take great pains to remind you of that fact' with references to Sugar Ray, *Before Sunrise*, Grey Poupon, Snapple, Liz Phair, *The Real World* and *Ricki Lake*. But then it turns and declaims:

> Watching it, though ... you'll most likely be reminded of a more recent vocabulary. You can almost sense the characters catching themselves just before they refer to one another's appropriations, microaggressions and code switching. Rarely has a period piece felt this assiduously up-to-date in its racial and gender politics. (Hale 2020)

The tension between the representation of the 90s and the cultural politics of the 2010s suggested in this review circulates within a mediated discourse that is rethinking the politics of gender and feminism at the turn of the millennium, raising the complicated relationship between a contemporary popular feminist sensibility and our recent postfeminist past. The beginning of this conversation can be marked by the emergence of the #FreeBritney movement as a viral hashtag in 2019, which raised the profile of her legal battle against her father's conservatorship, ordered by the courts in 2008. The movement's insistence that the conservatorship be ended reached an even wider audience with the release of the *New York Times* documentary *Framing Britney Spears* in 2021, which interrogated the hyper-sexualisation of the singer in the late 90s and 2000s and the way the tabloids, the paparazzi,

late night television, and various comedians exploited her fame for their own gain.

Little Fires Everywhere is part of a trend in cultural representations of the 1990s that 'foreground an anxiety about the contemporary condition' while the last decade of the millennium 'is often constructed in the contemporary imagination as a peaceful fin de siècle' (Ewen 2020). *Framing* is an example of one which came out in the middle of a succession of fictionalised reimaginings of the stories of female celebrity figures of the 90s who were vilified at the time as sluts, liars, airheads, and cheats: *Confirmation* (2016), *I, Tonya* (2017), *Lorena* (2019), *Impeachment: American Crime Story* (2021) and *Pam & Tommy* (2022). Largely the trend is 'sentimental and essentially conservative', except for a few that have 'more explicitly productive relationships to the past' (Ewen 2020), working in the mode of 'reflective nostalgia'. In Svetlana Boym's influential book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), reflective nostalgia is ambivalent about the past, conscious of the contradictions of the present, and self-aware of the limitations of memory and ideas of historical truth (Boym 2001). I have argued elsewhere (Cobb forthcoming) that the screen revisions of 90s female celebrities are in this more critical mode for the ways they re-present the media culture of that decade as unapologetically misogynist, consequently implicitly critiquing the postfeminist discourses that used irony as a defence at the time (McRobbie 2008).[6] At the same time, these texts are in conversation with the cultural politics of the contemporary moment, especially the rise of fourth-wave feminism and its mediated version, popular feminism.

In *LFE*, Elena is representative of postfeminism in her whiteness (Butler 2013), her individual success (McRobbie 2008), her retreat from too much success into marriage (Negra 2008), her fear of lesbianism, and her conspicuous consumption (Tasker and Negra 2007). At the same time, she is also linked to that period through the casting of Witherspoon. The flashbacks of Elena's pre-married life present her as ambitious, sexually active, romantic, independent, and privileged. As such, we might see Elena as the mature, married, mother version of those millennial chick flick protagonists that Witherspoon herself often played in films like *Cruel Intentions* (Kumble 1999), *Election* (Payne 1999), *Legally Blonde,* and *Sweet Home Alabama* (Tennant 2002). In the series' contemporary setting of the late 1990s, having downsized her career and retreated into marriage and family, Elena is obsessed with the appearances and appropriate behaviour expected of her upper-class life. At the same time, she, and members of her family, speak the post-racial discourses of that era, reflected in their town of Shaker Heights and its strict planning and development regulations. Elena's sense of control is picked apart in the series by her inability to sympathise with the characters around her whose identities and experiences do not fit her world view: Bebe's poverty, Izzy's sexuality, and the racism that Mia deals with daily. When the

NYT article refers to vocabulary of the present, it is referring to the moments when these characters challenge her directly, like Mia does. The word 'microagressions' is never uttered in the show. The implication is that speaking out loud about race, sexuality, and class is a twenty-first century activity awkwardly imposed on the past,[7] a view that, in Boym's terms, suggests a preference for 'restorative nostalgia' that constructs the past as static and in line with accepted national history. As such, the reviews from this point of view expect a version of the 90s that seems 'true' – the 'peaceful fin de siècle', before Black Lives Matter, the election of Trump, the Women's March, the rise of the alt-right and, most importantly, the social media that facilitated wider awareness of these political movements and forced mainstream media to join the conversations and debates about them.

The series aired on Hulu in the States and on Netflix in the UK in late March and early April of 2020, just as we entered the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for some reviewers the series spoke to the heightened anxiety and fear it created, and they are less critical in this way and more positive about the political content of the show. As one review puts it, it seemed to capture the mood: 'Feel like the world is going up in flames? You'll love *Little Fires Everywhere*' (Ali 2020). After noting that the series was released early on the day before California ordered lockdown, another review declared it 'a gripping, soapy reminder that yesterday's ills are still present' (McFarland 2020). Then there is the subset of reviews that insist that '*Little Fires Everywhere* is the second season of *Big Little Lies* we deserved' (Lowry 2020) and compare Elena and [Witherspoon's character] Madeline because each

> personifies the brand of white feminist liberalism that makes anybody they unconsciously view as lesser beings want to rip their hair out while shattering glass with their screams. We just didn't notice that irritating trait in Madeline as much because the only major character of color in 'Big Little Lies' was simultaneously presented as thoroughly exoticized and assimilated. (McFarland)

These reviews are suggestive for the ways they see Elena as very much a figure of the present as well as the past. They tap into the series' refusal to play the same tune as the other women's televisions series that epitomise the intimate public of feminist-femininity, in which feminism is a performance of tropes disassociated from politics and subsumed by a representation of femininity that presumably all women have in common, as Berlant says of twentieth-century women's culture. *Little Fires Everywhere* is as much of a melodrama as *Big Little Lies*, but it is a countersentimental one. Across the discourses of its authorship, adaptation, and reception, it does have conversations that feel intimate and revelatory but it holds back on the sense of relief for its

white women audience. In the final scene, Elena is seen alone in the charred remains of her home. There is no intersectional, sisterly, sentimental ending: no benevolent mammy; no benign white woman.

As I argued in the introduction, the shows of the golden age of women's television cultivate fantasies of belonging in female friendship in order to alleviate anxieties and manage the difficulties of the politically tumultuous contemporary moment. By adapting a countersentimental novel and raising the stakes of its raced and classed tensions between its central white woman and Black woman, *Little Fires Everywhere* rejects the popular feminist trope of intersectional sisterhood and the feeling of intimate belonging in other shows. Set in the 90s, it reminds us that recent women's culture restricted itself to images of individual white women successfully navigating patriarchy. Remaking this figure through Elena and her refusal to listen to Mia or learn to be 'better' – less racist, less homophobic, less classist – the series exposes the image of sentimental female solidarity as empty performativity, diminishing the apparent differences between our postfeminist past and popular feminist present. It is this invitation to recognize the political lack in the intimate public of feminist-femininity that points us back to the the writers' room. Its discourse of inclusiveness does participate in the economy of visibility in which popular feminism circulates. However, at the same time its insistence on difficult conversations between women resists the idealisation of a sentimental belonging in femininity and offers the possibility of a collaborative form of authorship that authorizes women's collective agency while holding onto the differences between them.

Notes

1. 'Women's novels' in this context does not exclusively refer to novels authored by women, though that is most often the case.
2. *The Handmaid's Tale* might seem an outlier in this list, but as several critics have shown it is set in a post-Obama-era-like future dystopia brought on by a right-wing, religious political coup and the protagonist is clearly marked as a feminist hero meant to invoke the rise in popular feminism during the Trump era; see Hendershot (2018).
3. See Smyth's article in this special edition for more on Witherspoon's popular feminism.
4. Notably it is not only voiced through Mia but reinforced through Elena's husband, who is more liberal and aware than her throughout the series, a common trope of postfeminist media texts. See: Modleski (1991) and Hamad (2013).
5. See also Orgad and Gill (2019).
6. See Cobb (forthcoming) 2025.
7. Other reviews that make this point include: Horton (2020) and Kang (2020).

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Sarah and Stefania for their ongoing patience and their helpful feedback on the draft. I am grateful to the University of Southampton who awarded me research leave to write this article. And all my gratitude to Neil whose constant encouragement and proofreading helped me complete this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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