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# Racialized Motherhood: Mothering Hardships and Resistance in *Little Fires Everywhere*

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## **Abstract**

Hegemonic discourses of motherhood have perpetuated a restrictive yet idealized imagery of the maternal figure as white, middle-class, married within a nuclear family. Nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers, often unquestionably associated with singleness are consequently excluded from this dominant narrative. Analyzing Liz Tigelaar's TV adaptation of Celeste Ng's novel *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), the aim of this paper is to demonstrate whether this exclusion is sustained by a series of social measures, namely structural differences, that could be argued to go back to social and political systems that dominated the period of colonial expansion. Alternatively, a woman who fails to comply with the patriarchal and controlling imagery of the "good" mother is at risk of being socially perceived as a "bad" mother. As the following analysis proves, this identification of nonwhite women as "deficient" mothers might derive into white, privileged mothers assuming the position and stereotype of the white savior, attempting to improve the circumstances of these mothers. Nonetheless, the present paper also reveals that the bond of sisterhood created between the two nonwhite, low-class mothers of the miniseries can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the oppression exerted by derogatory mothering discourses.

**Key words:** *Little Fires Everywhere*, racialized motherhood, structural differences, white savior, resistance.

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## Introduction

Mothers are essential for the development and evolution of human beings. The great majority of the population has been born of a woman, whether it was a natural pregnancy, a surrogacy contract, or other means. Traditionally, mothering has been associated almost exclusively with women. As such, “womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience” (Arendell 2000, 1192). Notwithstanding that being a mother and a woman are not mutually exclusive realities, in patriarchal societies, a woman’s identity strongly relies on her ability to bear child. In consequence, “society exerts structural and ideological pressures upon women to become mothers” (Roberts 1993, 34) and can be deemed deficient when they do not do so. Hence, given the complex facets of motherhood as intertwined with societal values, it has steadily become a subject of study within the field of Feminist and Gender Studies, stemming from deciding author Adrienne Rich and her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986). This favored the blossoming of motherhood research in the following two decades, and during the early 1990s, increasing scholarly research implemented an interdisciplinary approach so as to encompass motherhood and further variables, such as race and class (Collins 2002). As of late 1990s and early 2000s, as Samira Kawash identifies, motherhood research experienced a decline, possibly due to the preoccupation that “such attention to mothers [...] aligned with conservative ‘family values’ agendas that conflicted with feminist goals” (Kawash 2011, 971-972). Nevertheless, due to the efforts of scholars such as Andrea O’Reilly (2010), motherhood analysis regained momentum in the 2010s, parallel to the increasing number of TV series and movies with maternal characters as lead roles.

Media representations of motherhood from the 1980s onward might constitute an external force that conditioned the evolution of motherhood research. For instance, during the 1980s and 1980s, perchance not so casually coinciding with the decline in motherhood studies, “the so-called mommy wars [were] reported (or invented) by the popular media” (Kawash 2011, 975) positioning stay-at-home mothers against working mothers. This, consequently, could have served to polarize scholars within the motherhood field, hence halting their production. Not only this, but media attention rapidly shifted toward African American mothers, displaying a racialized perception of motherhood as diverse programs “awarded much more air time to the maternal failings of African American women” (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 172), thus portraying the African American woman as a “bad” mother. Nevertheless, these depictions seem to be changing with the new appearance of TV and online streaming series, such as

*Breeders* or *Big Little Lies*, that focus on maternal characters from different backgrounds and their everyday experiences. This could constitute an attempt at revealing the insights of the mothering enterprise and at challenging the racialized depictions of motherhood dominant in the last decades.

The Hulu adaptation of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* by producer Liz Tigelaar (2020) falls within this category of online streaming series that position the maternal figure at the center of the narrative and seek, as this paper intends to prove, to expose the reality of racialized mothers. In eight episodes, the miniseries recounts the arrival of black, working-class mother Mia Warren and her daughter Pearl at East Shaker, where they come into contact with white, entitled mother Elena Richardson and her family, and immigrant, low-class mother Bebe Chow. Due to its sharp focus on maternal characters, their vicissitudes and experiences, *Little Fires Everywhere* could be classified as a matrifocal narrative, understood as that which "begin[s] with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective" and "hold[s] fast to a maternal perspective" (Marianne Hirsch, Daly, and Reddy quoted in O'Reilly and Caporale Bizzini 2009, 11). Nevertheless, possibly due to the recent release of the miniseries and the novel upon which it is based, neither have been thoroughly analyzed. Incidentally, only a reduced number of scholars have examined the novel (Novita 2019, Shen and Wang 2019), and motherhood has rarely been the subject of study (Sagita and Wahyuni 2020). As regards the miniseries, as of the moment of writing this paper, Susan B. Williams' (2021) comparative analysis of *Little Fires Everywhere* with *The Scarlet Letter* and *In the Blood* constitutes the only paper written on the matter.

Following the tenets posed by Cultural Studies and the intersectionality between Feminist and Gender Studies and Black Feminist Studies, the aim of the present paper is to analyze the construction and exposure of racialized motherhood experiences in the miniseries as limited and conditioned by the power imbalance legitimized by hegemonic white, middle-class ideologies that target nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers. Therefore, one could contend that the miniseries is a fine example of the racialization of motherhood, therein permeated by a series of structural differences that, drawing upon the social structures and systems dominant during the colonization period (Collins 2002, Roberts 1993), contribute to the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" mothers. So as to better scrutinize the various aspects this analysis considers, a tripartite structure will be necessary. The first part will consider the nature and origin of structural differences, as well as their impact on the mothering experiences of nonwhite women. The following section will draw attention to the various reasons Elena Richardson utilizes to validate her abiding by the archetype of the white savior, both offering

Mia help and attempting to mother Pearl. Finally, the third part will focus on an array of acts of resistance rendered by the miniseries, while referring to the relevance of homeplace.

### **Racialized motherhood and structural differences**

The experiences of racialized motherhood are deeply connected to legal and social structural differences between diverse ethnic groups, mostly based on a series of “invisible privileges [that] function to maintain hierarchies of oppression” (Wildman quoted in Bush 2004, 28). These structural differences and the power hierarchies embedded in them constitute an instance of racism, “reflected in differential educational opportunities, economic differentials between whites and non-whites, residential segregation, [and] health care access” (Guess 2006, 652), as some of the most palpable examples. Alternatively, in their article, “Poverty and African American Mothers”, authors Camille Wilson Cooper and Shuntay Z. McCoy explore the multifaceted impact of poverty on African American families, especially on those whose main source of income is a single mother, and they foreground precisely systemic inequalities as the main originator of African American ratios of poverty. Nonetheless, their analysis also shows how, despite this evidence, US society tends to hold these families, and especially single mothers, responsible for their families’ deprivation:

The poverty many black families face is greatly influenced by a host of systemic issues like inadequate public education, escalated unemployment rates, and the lack of affordable housing in the U.S. Still, many African American families are pathologized in U.S. society. Single African American mothers, as the ‘head of the household,’ are particularly blamed for many of the challenges their families incur even when the structural inequality that has evolved over centuries in the U.S. contribute to families’ lingering challenges. (2009, 47)

African American single mothers are not only more openly blamed for their families’ poverty, but their households represent the greatest percentage of poverty ratios in the US, according to statistic. In the mid-90s, for instance, data showed that “one third of the African American population lives in poverty and female-headed families represent more than 73% of these poor African American families” (Dickerson 1994, xvi)<sup>1</sup>. The conclusion that can be extracted from both sources is that the economic imbalance between ethnic groups is systemic and, as such, an instance of structural differences with a reflection on the motherhood experience of non-white mothers, which is precisely what *Little Fires Everywhere* exposes and

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<sup>1</sup> Bette J. Dickerson considered this data in the introduction to *African American Single Mothers*, published in 1994. This information, although outdated, has been deemed relevant for the analysis of the circumstances of nonwhite mothers as depicted in the miniseries since it is set in the 1990s.

this paper aims at analyzing. The miniseries thus reveals the false and damaging correlation between racist social discourses and practices that construct single nonwhite mothers as “inadequate”, and the structural economic inequalities that relegate them to precarity and often poverty. At the same time, the narrative foregrounds how this presumed correlation results in a total lack of state support, which marginalizes these families and, as the series also highlights through the character of Bebe Chow, places them at a risk of alienation and disintegration. Furthermore, as Toft argues, not only African American mothers “have [...] consistently experienced more draconian social policies, exploitive economic conditions, and pernicious social discourses. [But] the soft power of discourse has compromised the recognition of African American mothers for hundreds of years” (Toft 2020, 7), and systemic disparities are the material expression of these discourses. Therefore, the ever-evolving forms of racialized systemic oppression, manifested in political, legal, economic and social structural discrimination, have an inevitable impact on the experiences of African American families and, in particular, of African American mothers who also face the consequences of the intersection of hegemonic motherhood ideologies and racist prejudices.

As a cultural product that engages with motherhood, both as institution and experience, and does so through characters that are differently positioned in the social power hierarchy due to intertwined class and racial conditionings, *Little Fires Everywhere* foregrounds a series of structural inequalities inherently associated to experiences of racialized motherhood. Indeed, so as to set a clear differentiation, the first scenes depicted in the first episode are highly revealing of these inequalities. The first of these scenes carries a specially weighted ideological meaning as it clearly portrays the different mothering capabilities of each mother. For instance, white, entitled Elena Richardson and her family represent the “imagined traditional family ideal”, consisting of a “a father-head earning an adequate family wage, [...] mother, and children” (Collins 2002, 47). The Richardsons are the epitome of the American nuclear family, living in a mansion, sending their kids to expensive extracurricular activities (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 14:40), and even enjoying the traditional eggs and bacon as breakfast (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 4:52). On the other end of the spectrum, Mia is a single, black mother with an only daughter. As portrayed at the beginning of the miniseries, they live in their car, pay their groceries with coupons (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 7:27), and even use the supermarket bathroom to tidy themselves up and brush their teeth (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 6:59). Therefore, considering media representations of the “nuclear family as the universal model of comparison in determining the extent of familiar stability and productivity” (Dickerson 1994, x), Mia’s current circumstances place her in opposition to this model, despite the deep structural differences that have forced her to adopt



said position. As a consequence of failing to comply with such image, Mia is deemed an “inadequate” mother, proving that the “social construct of the mother and motherhood carries a great deal of symbolic weight” (DiQuinzio 2010, 311).

The sudden appearance of Mia, in such a frontal opposition to the ideal family image, precipitates Elena Richardson’s counteraction. From a privileged standpoint, and possibly ignoring the consequences of her actions to Mia and her daughter, Elena calls the police before something “bad happen[s]” (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 5:56) when she sees her car in a parking lot. This could be understood as a seemingly good-intentioned action on the part of a worried citizen if not for the fact that Elena purposefully mentions that the individuals within the car are black. Her words may also allow the identification of Elena Richardson with the archetype of the white savior, in which a “powerful, brave, cordial, kind, firm, and generous” white individual “takes on a mission to save people of color from their plight” (Ash 2015, 89)<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, Elena Richardson does not fully belong into this category of white saviors, since the trope is mostly associated to a male outsider; on the contrary, Elena is deeply engrained within the community, she is a female and, most importantly, she is a mother. In this sense, Elena Richardson could be classified as a white mother savior. Therefore, the initial and highly distinctive portrayals of both mothers set the tone for the miniseries, while providing a visual depiction of the limited mothering circumstances of nonwhite women, like Mia Warren, as a result of the white, middle-class hegemonic ideologies that legitimize a deep power imbalance that most negatively affects disadvantaged mothers.

The mothering experience of nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers is also shaped by another major structural difference depicted in *Little Fires Everywhere*: the gender and race based inequality within the job market. While authors Barbara Reskin and Naomi Cassirer claim that “gender is a predominant basis of occupational segregation” (1996, 234), one should analyze this disparity from an intersectional perspective. This could reveal that “labor market segmentation is not only gender but also race specific” (Brewer 1988, 339) and that, incidentally, non-white women “are found in lower status jobs more often than white women” (Albelda 1985, 76). This could lead to the impossibility for nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers of fulfilling their mothering capabilities at their best. Incidentally, Lisa Sun-Hee Park, when analyzing how immigrant mothers are criminalized in US society, contends that “they must provide for all the trappings of a middle-class childhood for their children but with fewer

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<sup>2</sup> This characterization of the white savior has been extracted from Erin Ash’s analysis of the film *The Blind Side*. Since that film and the present miniseries present a female white savior, Ash’s definition of said trope can be extrapolated to the analysis of Elena Richardson.

resources and greater barriers to do so” (Park 2011, 41). Her conclusions could be extrapolated to the circumstances of nonwhite mothers in *Little Fires Everywhere*. For instance, Bebe Chow and Mia Warren are waitresses at a fast-food restaurant, a “low-paid service work, which does not provide sufficient income to support a family” (Collins 2002, 60) and that hinders Bebe’s access to a lawyer when trying to pursue the custody of her baby (Tigelaar 2020, 4, 8:53), while Elena Richardson is a journalist at the local newspaper. Incidentally, not only are nonwhite mothers in a disadvantaged position in the job market due to derogatory discourses and practices that specifically target nonwhite individuals, but they are also deemed “inadequate” mothers due to their low income. This is best exemplified in the trial for the custody of Bebe’s daughter, May Ling. In depicting Mr. Richardson, lawyer and hence hard power, incessantly questioning Bebe on her income and how she plans to take care of her baby (Tigelaar 2020, 7, 11:27), the trial foregrounds how hegemonic discourses have intertwined income and motherhood in such a manner that nonwhite mothers are considered unfit for their low salary, proving the capitalization of motherhood in current societies since “money has become the deciding factor of who is fit to mother a child” (Taylor 2011, 904). Therefore, this occupational contrast between white and nonwhite mothers, often reinforced by underlying dominant white ideologies, is a further instance of the palatable difference of their mothering possibilities as well as the discrimination they face on the part of hegemonic institutions that reinforce and permeate derogatory discourses.

Ultimately, the narrative of *Little Fires Everywhere*, via the two sets of mothers, exposes how this market segmentation, which leads to income inequality across races, has different effects on the possibilities of white, middle-class mothers, and nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers. For instance, the desperate economic situation of immigrant, working-class mother Bebe Chow is recounted in the third episode in a series of greyed- and blued-tone scenes that remark the isolation of the character, as part of a strategy used in cinema to “convey inner states by either openly or subliminally adjusting the colors of the set design” (Flueckiger 2016, 152-53). In the most relevant scene, Bebe Chow is depicted heartbreakingly crying at her impossibility of feeding her four-month baby after having gone to a local store to buy baby powder but having been denied this purchase because of her being “seventy cents short” (Tigelaar 2020, 3, 2:07). When Bebe tries to appeal to the cashier’s better nature and tells her that it is just for her baby, that she has not eaten in three days, the woman answers that she should “try breastfeed” (Tigelaar 2020, 2, 2:11), something that Bebe cannot do because she has not eaten for an even longer period. She does not have the resources to buy food, not even for her baby. On the other end of the spectrum, as a white, entitled woman, Elena enjoyed the

benefits of a job position that allowed her to pay for the services of a caretaker for all four of her children (Tigelaar 2020, 6, 15:04), a practice that Tiffany Taylor identifies with middle- and upper-class families as a result of the different “social structures of work” (2011, 902) across races. Henceforth, through the characters of Mia and Bebe, *Little Fires Everywhere* proves that this market segmentation, a crucial structural inequality, can entail highly negative consequences for nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers at the focus of this disparity, as it limits and conditions their mothering capabilities.

### **The White Mother Savior: “Good” Mothers vs “Bad” Mothers**

As a result of the profound structural differences and lack of state support that most negatively affect nonwhite mothers and that prevents them from satisfactorily fulfilling their mothering possibilities, nonwhite mothers are not in a favorable position to make choices and decisions on behalf of their children that white, entitled mothers consider appropriate. Thus, the dichotomy between making “good” choices as opposed to the reality of having choices is key to the narrative of *Little Fires Everywhere*. A discussion between Mia Warren and Elena Richardson on the fourth episode of the miniseries can be considered the epitome of this binary as Elena criticizes Mia for not having made “good” choices for her daughter Pearl (Tigelaar 2020, 4, 39:44). She also argues that “it is a miracle that Pearl is as lovely and wonderful as she is” (Tigelaar 2020, 4, 39:22), which proves that Elena sees Mia as embodying the trope of the matriarch, “a virulent stereotype that [argued] African American mothers were masculine, aggressive, uncaring, and potentially dangerous –raising maladapted children who performed poorly in school and life” (Toft 2020, 6). Alternatively, this dichotomy is an instance of what Judith Stadtman Tucker names “the choice mystique.” Tucker argues that “the concept of ‘choice’ seems to contain the possibility that there is more than one right way to be a good mother [...] but having choices is also recognized as a product of privilege” (2010, 299). As such, this mystique acknowledges the crucial value that having choices plays in the experience of motherhood, as a factor that differentiates two groups of mothers: those who have the possibility of making “good” choices on the grounds of “being rich and white and entitled” (Tigelaar 2020, 4, 39:57), as Mia Warren herself expresses; and those who do not make hegemonic “good” choices on behalf of their children and, consequently, are considered “deviant.”

Nevertheless, this binary discourse ignores the “social capital and [limited] access to resources” (Tucker 2010, 299) of these supposedly “deficient” mothers, who do not have the opportunity to make those choices due to their being overwhelmed by the “sense of

powerlessness against the financial and legal resources” (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 147) of the white elites. This standpoint is one that *Little Fires Everywhere* exemplifies in its portrayal of the hardships that Bebe Chow, an immigrant mother, suffers due to her being poor and excluded from the social fabric on account of the lack of protection by the legal system. According to Robin L. Jarrett, single, poor mothers “assess their options and make choices that allow them [and their children] to forge meaningful lives despite the harsh economic conditions in which they and their children find themselves” (1994, 45). By means of illustration, Bebe’s ultimate decision of leaving her baby on a fire station (Tigelaar 2020, 3, 3:09) hoping she would have a better life than the one she could provide is the finest example of the desperation racialized mothers endure as a result of the structural differences and lack of resources, often overlooked by white, patriarchal elites. Her decision might not be considered a hegemonic “good” choice, but it shows that these mothers are straightforwardly denied the possibility of making said decisions, which pushes them to alienation from other mothers and separation from their own children, as is the case of Bebe.

When analyzing in depth the choice construct, a subsequent layer of meaning and ideology reveals itself: making “good” choices supposedly leads to being a “good” mother, whereas not making them, even if it is as a consequence of the “unequal allocation of resources and privileges” (Hughey 2014, 4), can be equated to being a “deficient” mother. Elena Richardson, embodying the white patriarchal image of motherhood, permeates this discourse by arguing that “a good mother makes good choices” (Tigelaar 2019, 4, 39:36), hence mother-blaming Mia and Bebe for failing to make such decisions. The basis for Elena’s argument, incidentally, lies on the social, hegemonic foundations of motherhood. Since the patriarchal imagery of the “good” mother is “defined as white, middle-class, married” (O’Reilly 2010, 370), mothers like Bebe Chow –Chinese immigrant and low-class– or Mia Warren –black, single, and working-class– are considered “deviant” as they fail to comply with this hegemonic and patriarchal notion of motherhood. Furthermore, focusing on the matter of immigrant mothers, author Min Jiao argues that “immigrant mothers who have a past that inevitably shapes their present are different in their mothering power, yet are pathologized as deficient” (2019, 553), as *Little Fires Everywhere* arguably proves with the treatment that Bebe Chow receives in the trial: Mr. Richardson uses her experiences as an immigrant mother to question her seemingly “bad” choices (Tigelaar 2020, 7, 12:32), ignoring the circumstances that precipitated them. Nevertheless, these patriarchal motherhood discourses are not new but stem from the ideologies dominant during the colonization period. For instance, Camille Wilson Cooper and Shuntay Z. McCoy contend that the binary imagery of the “good” and the “bad” mother

currently used against nonwhite mothers is a remnant of slavery ideology. They argue that “the vestiges of slavery’s oppression [...] have helped sustain dominant ideologies that associate the feminine, loving, nurturing, and ‘good’ mother ideal with white women and assign demeaning, ‘bad’ mother stereotypes to African American women” (2009, 49). Therefore, *Little Fires Everywhere* exposes the rationale behind the construct of the “good” mother as an image created by controlling, entitled groups so as to ensure their superiority whilst ignoring the structural differences that lead to the impossibility of making hegemonical “good” choices.

*Little Fires Everywhere*, in depicting Elena Richardson and her at times caritative behavior toward non-white, lower class characters, arguably presents her embodying the archetype of the white savior as she offers aidance in their adverse circumstances. Author Matthew W. Hughey defines the white savior as “a white messianic character [who] saves a lower- or working-class [...] nonwhite character from a sad fate” (2014, 1). In this fashion, for instance, in the first chapter, Elena decides to rent her inherited house to Mia and Pearl after seeing they live in their car (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 11:47). Instead of, for example, acting so as to improve the general situation of deprived nonwhite citizens with deplorable access to housing, Elena abides by color-blind racism and acts on a lower level to enliven the particular circumstances of Mia. In this sense, Elena “facilitates the continuation of racial inequality by [...] obscuring the fact that inequality exists” (Hughey 2010, 490). Another significant instance of this trope is the job offer Elena makes to Mia as housekeeper (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 27:38), her attempt at helping Mia become a better mother with her support, even though the offer “reproduce[s] the mistress-houseslave relationship” (Roberts 1993, 21) of the slavery period. Before making the offer, Elena argues that working the night shift is not the best option for a mother and criticizes Mia’s current job (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 26:43). The ideology behind her rationale could be identified with what Douglas and Michaels term the “new momism.” According to this philosophy, which Elena uses to mother-blame Mia, “to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (2004, 4). Hence, Elena, depicting Mia as a matriarch and negligent mother, understands that Mia fails to comply with this tenet, which supposedly deems her in need of Elena’s guidance. This, alongside the extended belief that “a greater proportion of African American children than children from other ethnic groups [...] are at particular risk for compromised outcomes” (Murry et al 2001, 135), become Elena’s reasoning to legitimize her effort at mothering Pearl, thus embodying the white savior, although this mothering carries ideologies of whiteness. Therefore, *Little Fires Everywhere* exposes how white, privileged

mothers stand as saviors of nonwhite mothers and their children whilst permeating the structural differences that condition their mothering.

Inherently connected to the archetype of white savior that Elena Richardson embodies and to her behavior toward nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers Bebe and Mia is the complex notion of whiteness, “the privileged signifier” (hooks 1992, 339). This is one of the discourses that articulates the relations between different race groups, considering that whiteness “reveals ways in which whites benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that often appear (to whites) to have nothing to do with race” (Bush 2004, 6). Furthermore, as France Winddance Twine argues, “a white claim becomes inextricably linked to a middle-class economic position” (1996, 212), which makes it ultimately unattainable for those individuals, such as Bebe or Mia, who belong to lower social classes. This is precisely the ideology underlying the actions of the Richardsons in *Little Fires Everywhere* as, for instance, they enjoy a prosperous relation with law enforcement agencies that even allows Elena to ask for a criminal background check as a favor (Tigelaar 2020, 2, 21:18) and benefit from the protection afforded by its legal system. Meanwhile, racialized and lower-class individuals, such as Mia Warren and Bebe Chow, must prepare their children for racially biased encounters with the police and advise them to keep their “hands visible” (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 6:22), and struggle with their precarious housing situation, even being unable to afford the electricity bills and having it cut out (Tigelaar 2020, 3, 2:23) due to their restricted access to basic social resources. Henceforth, the benefits granted by whiteness, as one of the discourses that reinforces structural differences, create a social differentiation between white and nonwhite mothers and their families, one that ultimately impacts their mothering opportunities.

Nevertheless, the notion of whiteness is also relevant within the narrative of *Little Fires Everywhere* for another reason: Elena Richardson, in perceiving Mia Warren as a negligent mother, the reason why she acts as a white savior and offers Mia her help, attempts to mother Pearl. This leads to her whitening Pearl (Williams 2021, 12) according to hegemonic standards and imagery, even though it eventually becomes an effort of the entire Richardson family. For instance, Pearl, a girl who idealizes the lifestyle of the Richardson due to her harsh circumstances growing up, emulates their actions by watching their TV series (Tigelaar 2020, 1, 50:40), getting acquainted with their friends (Tigelaar 2020, 3, 48:47) and even participating in the traditional first day of school picture of the Richardsons (Tigelaar 2020, 2, 6:29); overall “adopting their values, speech, habits of being” (hooks 1992, 338). On another level, the initial portrayals of Pearl in the miniseries depict a young teenager with a distinct, and perchance childish, clothing style, who wears her hair in typical African American box braids. As her

encounters with the Richardson family increase and she gets more attached to adolescent Lexie Richardson, her clothing and hair styles change so as to emulate those of Lexie. However, these drastic changes are not ignored by Mia, who reprimands Pearl for becoming Lexie's "dress-up doll" (Tigelaar 2020, 3, 27:26) as she is withdrawing from her own identity and mimicking that of Lexie. This discussion, which develops in a scene with rapid changes of camera so as to emphasize the clash of Pearl and Mia's opinions, takes place after Pearl returns from a trip to the mall with a dress bought to her by Lexie. That trip reinforces the effects of whiteness on Pearl by revealing "the importance of material consumption [...] in its ability to confer an identity that makes residents of any racial background culturally invisible and acceptable members of the community" (Twine 1996, 213). Therefore, in this sense, *Little Fires Everywhere* can be understood as a stage where two radically different social standpoints clash: one being whiteness and its inherent privileges, embodied in the white, entitled mothers of the series, and the other being the economically, hence socially, oppressed sections of society, represented in resistant non-white mothers, who try to battle the imposition of a white-based ideology and imagery.

### **Acts and Places of Resistance**

As relevant as the various acts of oppression exercised upon non-white mothers could be in the narrative of *Little Fires Everywhere*, the miniseries also presents different manifestations of resistance to such oppression. Indeed, the diversity of acts of resistance reflects the words of Helen Boulware Moore when she contends that the ways in which non-white women respond to oppression "are as varied as are the women themselves" (1982, 43). In *Little Fires Everywhere*, these varied acts of resistance arguably revolve around the character of Mia Warren, a crucial competing force due to the bonds she creates with other characters, and to her own resistance. Her defiance is articulated around her actions within the house and her role as a mother, although both themes are interconnected. For instance, it could be argued that Mia's acceptance of Elena's offer as housekeeper is an act of resistance against the discourse of whiteness. In accepting the offer at the household, Mia is reinforcing her position as Pearl's mother in an attempt to protect her from Elena's influence. These actions reinforce the argument postulated by Gloria Wade-Gayles in "The Truth of Our Mother's Lives": "Black mothers [...] are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devaluates Black women" (1984, 12). Hence, Mia's actions could be understood as her own attempt at avoiding Pearl being shaped by a discourse of whiteness unattainable to a low-class, black teenager in a white-dominated society that exerts oppression upon this collective.

Nevertheless, perchance Mia's choices whilst working at the Richardsons' household are more representative of the connection between resistance and the homeplace. In this sense, her defiance is significant in a dual manner: she gains agency in reclaiming a sexist role assigned to women (hooks 1990, 385) so as to exercise her own will; whilst challenging the representation "founded upon custom and tradition" (Guess 2006, 651) of the black woman as maid in a white house. Author Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, establishes a connection between slavery practices and the overrepresentation of African American women in the domestic service. For instance, Collins argues that, while in the period of capitalist and colonial expansion, West African women "did not retain authority over their time, technology, workmates, or type and amount of work they performed" (2002, 49-50). Nevertheless, as a competing force, Mia challenges these various constraints and acquires control of her own work by deciding what hours to work (Tigelaar 2020, 2, 9:42) and the kind of work to fulfill (Tigelaar 2020, 2, 8:23). Therefore, it could be stated that Mia Warren is a powerful competing force, a mother protecting her daughter from white ideologies that would harm her, while overtly challenging the mother who embodies such derogatory philosophies.

The narrative of *Little Fires Everywhere* reveals sisterhood between nonwhite mothers to be a form of resistance against oppressive motherhood discourses, depicted in the miniseries in the relations that Mia establishes with racialized mother Bebe Chow. Since the most representative instances of sorority in *Little Fires Everywhere* take place in Mia's house, her homeplace becomes a reflection of sisterhood, hence a place of community, a "safe place" (hooks 1990, 42). Considering how "female friends play an integral role in socialization, survival, and growth enhancement" (Bryant-Davis 2013, 110), Mia's homeplaces also becomes a place of resistance for oppressed non-white mothers against the repressive discourses of white, entitled mothers. bell hooks, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, explores this idea of home being a place of resistance and argues that "working to create a homeplace that affirmed [their] beings, [their] blackness, [their] love for one another was necessary resistance" (hooks 1990, 45), a vindication of the inner self against the oppression of the outside. In this sense, by "actively engag[ing] in practices of making-oneself-at-home" (Mitchel 2020, 53), Mia creates a homeplace that then becomes a refuge where the oppressed, often alienated characters can express themselves and find consolation. This is more evident as regards Bebe and the bond between the two mothers, which stems from the sharing of their mothering experiences (Tigelaar 2020, 2, 51:49). Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate to obviate how Elena's daughters seek at Mia's home the consolation and support they cannot find in their cold and oppressive house, despite it being the finest depiction of the hegemonic nuclear family's house.



Incidentally, the miniseries culminates with the “visually dazzling, burning down of [the Richardsons’] house” (Williams 2021, 5), which could be understood as the ultimate expression of the message *Little Fires Everywhere* attempts to transmit: in a white-dominated society, being rich and white might facilitate the process of mothering but this does not inherently lead to being a good mother for your children; rather, Mia and Bebe, despite having their opportunities restricted by the hegemonic system by means of profound structural differences and the overrepresentation of “incompetent” nonwhite mothers, prove more understanding mothers to their daughters than Elena.

### **Conclusion**

Motherhood is a complex notion. As it is the experience of mothering a sentient being. As *Little Fires Everywhere* proves, this mothering can be utterly more complex for racialized women. Mothers like Bebe Chow and Mia Warren face a double conundrum, an intersectional one: they are women in a patriarchal society, and they are black women in a community that, in general terms, renders the lives and values of blacks as less valuable than those of whites. In consequence, the racist and derogatory ideologies that condition the experiences of racialized mothers are the base of profound structural differences that create a deep differentiation between white and nonwhite women as regards their mothering capabilities. Since they are conditioned by their low salaries, a result of a market segmentation that targets more harshly nonwhite women, mothers like Mia and Bebe cannot provide the same experiences to their children as those of white mothers, nor can they afford making those choices deemed “appropriate” by hegemonic white mothers. This can ultimately lead to their marginalization from other mothers.

Nevertheless, what might be perceived as more outrageous is the fact that these women are mother-blamed and considered unfit for caretaking because of their restricted mothering capacities, despite the fact that this limitation stems from hindrances posed by patriarchal, hegemonic representations of motherhood. Hence, the same discourses that target nonwhite, low- or working-class mothers like Mia and Bebe and difficults their motherhood journey are the ones that depict said mothers as “inadequate.” This ideology of inadequacy is, in turn, used by white, privileged mothers like Elena Richardson to offer, supposedly in a magnanimous manner, their help to disadvantaged mothers and, simultaneously, to mother their children according to dominant ideologies of motherhood. What *Little Fires Everywhere* also reveals is that this mothering by hegemonic white women is embedded in whiteness. As a result of the influence of Elena and her family on Pearl, the teenager starts changing her habits and physical

appearance so as to emulate those of the Richardsons, even risking the disappearance of her own identity as a black individual.

However, *Little Fires Everywhere* challenges all these hegemonic and derogatory discourses and imagery of motherhood by foregrounding acts of resistance that oppressed mothers can adopt to defy those discourses. Apart from engaging in a legal battle for the custody of Bebe's baby or frontally defying Elena's instructions in the household, the bond of sisterhood created between Mia and Bebe as a result of their shared experiences is perhaps the most relevant defiance portrayed in the series. Therefore, the miniseries is in itself an act of resistance, one that reveals that nonwhite, low- or working-class women are not "deficient" mothers.

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