USC UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

"It came, over and over, down to this: What made someone a *mother*?": Motherhood, Race and Class in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and its TV Adaptation

Autora: Miriam Toucedo Vila

Titora: Susana Mª Jiménez Placer

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

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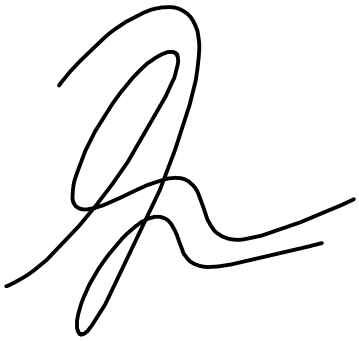

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Título: *"It came, over and over, down to this: what made someone a mother?"*: Motherhood, race and class in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and its TV adaptation

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

As most mothers would agree, motherhood is a unique, life-altering experience, which does not come with an instruction manual. Neither time, nor experience or pre-existing social conventions can determine what makes someone a person fit for the role of a mother. The aim of this dissertation is, precisely, to debunk the aforementioned factors that have been established to determine a woman's fitness as a mother as depicted in Celeste Ng's novel *Little Fires Everywhere* published in 2017 and in its TV adaptation, the limited series of the same name developed by Liz Tigelaar, which premiered in the streaming service Hulu in 2018.

This dissertation will study the different ways in which women experience motherhood in the novel and the TV series; some characters have become mothers in the traditional manner (such as the character of Elena Richardson) and others have resorted to more unconventional methods such as adoption (as illustrated in the McCullogh family) and surrogacy (depicted in Mia Warren). In addition, this analysis will bring into question what role do class circumstances as well as race considerations have in the development of the experience of motherhood in Ng's novel and Tigerlaar's TV series.

SR. DECANO DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidente da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

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1. Introduction

From Hester Prynne's sacrifices in the name of love for her child, to the common trope of the deceased but ever-present figures of the mothers in Walt Disney's movies, there is no doubt that the figure of the mother is one of the most frequently used in every type of popular media. Mothers have often been represented as silent, but comforting and reassuring figures who push their children to achieve great success in their endeavors – however, not many pieces of media are created with motherhood as the center of the narrative.

When I first read Celeste Ng's novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, this deep dive into the intricacies of motherhood (that most novels I had previously read shied away from) really stuck with me. I have always been inclined to the role of motherhood, some of my first memories are of playing-pretend as a mother and of seeing my own mother raise my young brothers and wondering what it would be like to be a mother myself someday. As I grew up, this desire has not left me, but depictions of motherhood such as that of Ng's have made me gain greater respect and admiration for it. My idea for this dissertation was grounded on my own curiosity for the ways in which women experienced motherhood on their different circumstances and how such a role could become an identity, as in the case of Elena Richardson.

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the various ways in which motherhood is represented in *Little Fires Everywhere*, in order to examine the different ways in which motherhood can be conceived and how intrinsic aspects such as race and class interfere with this experience. In order to deepen and enrich the analysis, two primary sources will be used – on the one hand, Celeste Ng's 2017 novel, *Little Fires Everywhere* and, on the other hand, its 2020 TV adaptation of the same name, developed for the American streaming service Hulu by Liz Tigelaar. Although two different sources are used, many of the events and characteristics

of the characters overlap; therefore not many distinctions between the two works will be made if there are no substantial divergences that require them.

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters. The first one is dedicated to the analysis of the pertinent literature on the topics of motherhood, race and adoption, both on a general level (in order to determine what aspects of motherhood are common to all mothers) and on a more specific note (in consonance with the types of motherhood represented on the source material). It examines what society has deemed as the ideals for motherhood in contrast to the aspects of the experience of motherhood that are not discussed as often. It also analyzes the role that race plays in a woman's mothering (as it is radically different to the standard for white women) and, more specifically, how the experience differs for black mothers. To finish, this chapter will also speak of the two roles of mothers in adoption – the side of the adoptive mother and that of the birthmother. The use of literature was essential for the elaboration of Chapter 2, especially *Mothers, Mothering and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences*, the Reader edited by Andrea O'Reilly; Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Bassin's *Representations of Motherhood* as well as multiple specialized articles. On the topic of surrogate mothering, a number of specialized websites were the primary source.

The second chapter gives a general overview of the contexts of the source materials, through a biographical review about the author of the novel and the developer of the show and a study about suburbia and its implications in the United States, in order to establish how the time and location of the action affected the events that take place in it.

Lastly, there will be an analysis of the four main characters of the book who are mothers, whilst contrasting this information with the literature analyzed in the first chapter, in order to determine in what way these representations match with the data.

2. Motherhood, Race and Adoption

2.1. Motherhood as Experience and Institution

Women have traditionally been defined by their relationship to motherhood. Society has made motherhood into an essential (if not the only) source of identity for women, something they must go through in order to be considered 'real' women in its eyes: "Women's status as childbearer has been made into a major factor of her life. Terms like 'barren' or 'childless' have been used to negate any further identity" (Rich 11). Following Adrienne Rich's study on motherhood, this chapter will focus on the way motherhood exists as an experience and as an institution. For Rich, the experience of motherhood might be defined as: "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children"; while the institution of motherhood refers to "the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (13).

Despite the exaltation of motherhood in early civilizations, as human societies became more male-dominated, motherhood has been turned into a weapon to keep women submitted to certain rules. In fact, pre-patriarchal societies might have been considered "gynocentric", as pointed out by Rich (93) – women were granted positions of power in their societies, and assured that that power belonged to them by nature. However, the situation changed with the development of patriarchal societies. In what relates to motherhood, men in patriarchal societies have made of the experience an institution, taking the lead in the decision-making of matters regarding female fertility, pregnancy and delivery – despite their minimal role in some of these processes.

The control exerted by men in power over women's rights as mothers is, perhaps, grounded in the two coexisting yet contradictory views patriarchy has of women. As noted by Rich:

> [On the one hand] the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, 'the devil's gateway'. On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood–that same body with its bleedings and mysteries is her single destiny and justification in life. (34)

Women who are mothers are controlled through the relinquishment of their power of decision in what childbearing and delivery concerns; while women who decide not to become mothers (or simply cannot) earn a negative status. These views are not just particularly damaging, but they have been deeply ingrained both in our society and on women; as a consequence motherhood, once only an experience, has become a source for identity.

However, it is important to note that "Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time" (Rich 26-27). Society classifies women into 'good' or 'bad' mothers, it judges those who are not mothers to be "barren", and the institution of motherhood places incredibly heavy burdens on all of these women. In fact, motherhood is perhaps "the heaviest of social burdens" (52), since women are accountable for their children's wellbeing and behavior as well as for their development and, even in families where there is a father figure present, she assumes the responsibility of being her offspring's entire environment (52-53). This leads to feelings of guilt and failure, as well as to a loss of their own identity, whenever they put their own needs aside for the sake of their children and dedicate themselves completely to their care and socialization.

In conclusion, despite the positive light shun in the experience of motherhood by our society it is important to note that, like any institution, it contains flaws. Regardless of the inclusiveness in the experience of motherhood, the institution surrounding it benefits from pitting women against one another. In fact, it is safe to say that: "The gulf between 'mothers' and 'non-mothers' […] will be closed only as we come to understand how both childbearing and childlessness have been manipulated to make women into negative quantities, of bearers of evil" (249).

2.2. Race and Motherhood

Through the years, feminist theorizing has focused on the figure of the white, middle-class woman. This prototypical mother raised her children in a nuclear household, in which the roles established for men and women were clear and strictly followed – men were in charge of the economic matters surrounding the family, while women were expected to dedicate their time and efforts simply to the care of their infants and the house. Feminist theories conclude that what women lack the most in what may be regarded as institutional motherhood, as briefly mentioned in the preceding chapter, is autonomy and identity.

However, white, middle-class mothers often benefited from a privileged economic status, as well as racial privilege – something that was never granted to mothers of color, whose experiences were not deemed worth of study until more recently: "Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated" (hooks qtd. in O'Reilly 144). In fact, mothers of color's identities are constantly threatened due to factors external to them. As listed by Collins, there are three major points that condition their experience:

1. Their lack of control over their own bodies: sometimes higher institutions (whether part of the medical field or outside of it) even discourage women of color from having more children, often going as far as sterilizing them without their consent.
2. Their struggle to keep their children. Women of color are more liable to lose their children to factors like death, or through forced relinquishment (as it is the case of many Native American women).
3. The exertion of control of the dominant racial group over their children's minds in order to erase their identities through various methods such as flawed educational systems, racist propaganda… (60)

In addition, Collins concludes that: "Since work and family have rarely functioned as dichotomous spheres for women of color, examining racial ethnic women's experiences reveals how these two spheres actually are interwoven" (58). This demonstrates that work and family, the spheres that are traditionally so clearly distinguished for white upper and middle-class mothers, are not as precise and clear-cut in the case of families of color, in which the mothers have often had to assume both spheres as their own responsibilities. Thus, the precarious situation of African-American, Chinese-American, Native American and Latina mothers usually forces them to take on both economic and nurturing responsibilities in order to ensure the physical survival of their children. In addition to this, racialized mothers have the responsibility to equip their children with the tools that will help them survive in a racist, unjust society.

2.2.1. Black Mothers and Mothering

Along North American history, black women have constantly been the victims of the greatest oppression, due to their belonging to two widely oppressed social groups – that of women and that of people of color. In the words of Alice Walker:

> Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the mule of the world," because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – everyone else – refused to carry. […] When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest comer. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. (405)

This degrading of black women to the lowest status in society is reflected in the oppression they face not just in society, but also inside their own ingroups. Theorist Patricia Hill Collins discusses the different factors that make feminist theories surrounding motherhood unsuitable for black mothers, since they fail to represent their experiences:

1. Motherhood is perceived as something that occurs inside of a nuclear household. However, racial oppression has made nuclear households unreachable for many black households, who do not have the resources to support it.
2. At large, African-American households do not ascribe to the same "sex-role segregation" as do white middle-class families; this means, the roles associated to each gender appear to be more faded in black families.
3. African American mothers are less likely to become stay at home mothers (58-59).

As established in the preceding chapter, and along with other mothers of color, for black mothers mothering consists, primarily, of ensuring the physical survival of their offspring which, contrary to that of white middle-class children, is never granted. Racialized children face higher mortality rates and, if they survive, their life is generally one of poverty. Nonetheless, as a "nurturing" approach to mothering (commonly associated to that of white mothers) is what is widely regarded as the most adequate take on

motherhood, black mothers' "preservative love" "is often not regarded as real, legitimate, or 'good enough' mothering" (O'Reilly 152).

However, it is important to note that (contrary to the case of the rest of the mothers of color), black women have the support of their community behind them. In fact, mothers are one of the most respected figures inside African American communities, due to the importance of mothering and motherhood in their culture. It is, therefore, common for African American mothers to practice 'othermothering', which consists in caring for the children of the community, acting as mother figures replacing the mothers who cannot be present. This practice is rooted in the belief that the responsibility of caring for a child should not just be left to the mother. 'Othermothering' "provides multiple role models for children; it keeps the traditional African value systems of communal sharing and ownership alive" (Wane qtd. in O'Reilly, 159)

Collins considers that African American views on motherhood are deeply rooted in West African mothering traditions, which situated black mothers as more empowered and independent, compared to their white, middle-class counterparts. This empowerment stems from the need of black mothers to redefine the image that society had created of them, which had been rooted in slavery and was deeply affected by stereotypes (qtd. in O'Reilly 146).

2.3. Motherhood and Adoption

Despite the controversy surrounding this topic, deemed by many a taboo subject, adoption is the main option for women who wish to be mothers but cannot because of their own personal circumstances, which may range from infertility to singleness or diverse sexual orientations. As stated in Katz and Hunt:

> Adoption offers the possibility of motherhood to more women than pregnancy alone. […] Adoption also permits women to become

> mothers without requiring them to be partnered, married, or heterosexual. […] Adoption also provides possibilities for women not to parent after their birthchildren. (91)

This section will explore the topic of adoption, taking a deep dive into its history and how it is viewed in the present, as well as analyzing the roles of the mothers involved in this process (the birth mother and the adoptive mother).

2.3.1. History of Adoption

For the majority of women who, along history, have had to part with their offspring, relinquishing one's child has usually stemmed from desperation and resulted from a combination of factors, which include lack of resources and support, as well as the shortage of options for the termination of the pregnancy. In contrast, this has hardly ever been the case for the more privileged sectors of the population, who had "either the means to care for their children or the medical connections to terminate the pregnancies" (Solinger qtd. in Katz and Hunt 181).

The first adoption records in the United States date from 1851 and were legalized in the state of Massachusetts. Despite being legal, these adoptions were surrounded by complete secrecy in order to preserve the "illegitimate" child's identity as well as that of the birth mother, so that she would not go through the public shame that such a situation entailed (Yngvesson 42-44 qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 70). This procedure would lead to the creation of the so-called "Orphan Trains[1]", which ran from 1854 until 1929.

After World War II pregnant, unmarried white women were compelled to hide their state in maternity homes and, once their babies were born, to relinquish them to "married, 'legitimate' couples" (Solinger 70, qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 70). This type of adoption was a ploy

[1] This initiative took impoverished (and often homeless) children from the major cities (i.e.: New York City) and sent them away from their mothers, under the wing of new families in predominantly rural areas (Blakemore).

to benefit social workers, who sold the children to couples who suffered from infertility. However, this was not the fate of racialized mothers, who were left to care for their children due to the prejudices present in society that declared women of color's pregnancies a result of the immorality associated to their race:

> Throughout North American history, and even today, women of color and immigrants have been perceived as immoral and hyper-sexualized, attributes inconsistent with traditional motherhood. Culturally, "good mothers" adhere to a sexually chaste femininity available only to white women who are monogamous within and dependent upon heterosexual marriage. (Pietsch 28-29, qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 70)

During the 1970s, the adoption business saw a decay, as women became more empowered and single mothers often decided to keep their children and reject the shame posed on them by their contemporary society. From this time onwards, the discussion surrounding the "choice" that birth mothers have on their hands becomes very prominent, with the widespread belief that every birth mother (despite the type of adoption) has a choice in the matter. After the late 1990s, the concept of open adoption[2] was introduced (despite only being approved as a legal procedure by 24 states at the time) and, today, it is the preferred method for most birth mothers, as it provides them with a sense of control over their decision (Solinger qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 77).

2.3.2. Adoptive Mothers

As noted by Pertman "Most women or couples who pursue formal adoption are white and economically advantaged" (Pertman qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 74). Although circumstances may vary, and they have become increasingly diverse through the years, most women tend to

[2] The term 'Open Adoption' refers to the type of adoption "in which the adoptive and birth families share identifying information and have contact with each other during and after the adoption process" (American Adoptions)

resort to adoption after being diagnosed with infertility problems and having gone through medical procedures to get pregnant themselves. However, there is a small percentage of women who consider adoption as their main option, due to various reasons. This is not the case for most women of color, who are largely more inclined toward the fostering of children from their own families and/or social circles and, in addition, their generally unfavorable economic situations do not allow taking care of such expenses.

However central and essential adoptive mothers are to the process of adoption, their figure is not as notorious as it should be. Most adoptive mothers enter the process of adoption with feelings of unresolved grief, to quote from Kutz and Hunt:

> Initially, loss and grief presumably stem from infertility, possible miscarriages and the lost opportunity for pregnancy and childbirth. … Mothers may encounter other forms of loss and grief both in the time of the adoption and the years that follow. For example, some may mourn the loss of an unrealized fantasy child. (78)

There is, most of the times, a criticizing atmosphere surrounding the role of adoptive mothers, often associated with their longing for a child that is genetically and biologically their own; this leads to a lack of empathy with the adoptive mothers' struggles, as well as with their feelings of "low entitlement to parent, low worth as women and envy and competition toward fertile women" (79).

It is these feelings that shape the adoptive mothers' "preferences" considering the adoption of a child. Most pre-adoptive mothers seek out young children, preferably of their own ethnicity "in accord with the traditional birth family" (Kutz and Hunt 75). Nevertheless, taking into account the shortage of children placed for adoption after the emergence of contraceptive methods and the increasing empowerment of single mothers, pre-adoptive

parents resorted to searching for children of different ethnicities to parent. It is this way that now, mothers who are wishing to parent daughters, turn to China to adopt, where it is more common for baby girls to be orphaned (Jacobson qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 75).

Caring for a child from a different race entails knowledge, respect and celebration of the infant's birth culture – a task that is often laid on the mother's hands. Women who seek to adopt multicultural children must be aware of the responsibilities that this type of mothering entails before the procedures begin:

> Adoptive mothers who are committed to multiculturalism experience a double vision. They love and care for their child in a "colorblind" way, as they would any birth child. Yet such mothers, also recognize that, unlike a birth child, the visibly adopted child has unique needs related to her race, ethnicity and culture. (Livingston qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 73)

The adoption of multiethnic children adds another thick layer of responsibility to the already essential role of the adoptive mother. To quote from Traver: "[...] A family's cultural structural socialization via food, clothing, traditions and holiday celebrations is seen as 'woman's work', adoptive mothers are center to whether, how and in what ways their families negotiate multiculturalism" (qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 73).

These considerations about the common profile of adoptive mothers further support the notion that their role is filled with pressure, and often misunderstood and diminished by the opinions of outside sources: in Uhrlaub and McCaslin's words: "adoptive mothers are often stigmatized as people. Commonly, they are stereotyped as naïve, unfulfilled, inadequate women who resent pregnant women and their child's birthmothers" (qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 83).

2.3.3. Birth Mothers

Women who give up their babies for adoption (that is, birthmothers) "are the least studied, understood and served members of the adoption triad" (Freundlich qtd. in D'Arcy 179): in spite of their critical role through the process, they are still misunderstood. When a birthmother relinquishes her baby, she is no longer seen as a mother and her feelings and needs appear no longer to be valid: the situation means the end of all the privileges that come with traditional motherhood.

Along the years, adoption has been seen as a positive experience for all the parties involved, and women who give up their children are assumed to have a choice in the matter and deemed as brave women, who put their children's future over their own feelings. Withal, there is a general tendency among birthmothers concerning their decision of relinquishing their children:

> While some mothers might truly not want to parent, the vast majority of birth mothers both in the distant and recent past continue to report that they did want to parent their babies, but felt that they did not have the capabilities or support to do so successfully. (D'Arcy 205)

Looking back into the history of adoption, this statement comes as no surprise for birthmothers, who, for the most part, were forced by circumstances to give up their children. However, little is known about the challenges of being a birthmother, or the grief that will accompany those women even after the adoption process has been finalized.

To quote D'Arcy, the losses of birthparents "are generally not afforded mourning or grieving rituals" (187). Birthmothers are often depersonalized, seen as objects that are part of a transaction, rather than who they really are: mothers who are separated from their children. In fact, many birthmothers regret giving up their children after doing so, because the pain that

comes with relinquishment is far greater than what they had expected it to be. As a matter of fact: “relinquishing mothers have more grief symptoms than women who have lost a child to death, including more denial; despair, atypical responses; and disturbances in sleep, appetite, vigor” (187).

It is particularly striking that the reaction of these women who make adoption possible for many expectant adoptive parents is the least studied. Adoption is seen as an overall positive experience for the birthmothers who, in contrast, can hardly find social understanding. This is fueled by the common assumption that their offspring is better off with someone else parenting them, and the general discourse that tells birthmothers that keeping their children would be selfish, while giving them up would make them what they do not believe themselves to be: good mothers.

There is still a lot to find out about the figure of the birthmother, and not enough research focuses on them. This is most likely an effect of the lack of data about the real number of birth mothers, which stems from the silencing of the birthmothers and their feelings of shame about relinquishment. Until further research is completed, the question of the actual role of the birthmother’s choice in most cases of child adoption will still be up in the air. All in all, one thing is for sure: “The decision about whether to voluntarily relinquish one’s child for adoption is likely the most important decision a mother will ever have to make with lifelong, and often unknown, consequences” (180)

2.4. Surrogacy

Nowadays, there seems to be no topic regarding motherhood that sparks as much controversy as that of surrogacy. A fairly new process, the first legal surrogacy agreement dates back to 1976, just one year after the first ethical embryo transfer through IVF had been successful. After the favorable result of said agreement, in 1980 a couple of intended parents signed the

first compensated surrogacy agreement in history, for which the surrogate mother received $10,000 – the standard amount of money that is still, to this day, being paid for such services (Surrogate.com)

There are two different types of surrogacy: traditional and gestational surrogacy. As its name implies, traditional surrogacy respects the fundaments of what might be considered biological motherhood, as the surrogate mother not only provides her womb for the gestation but also one of her eggs. As a result, the baby she would be carrying and then relinquishing to these parents would be biologically her own, while the baby would hold no biological ties to its 'adoptive' mother (Dillaway 4). Although slightly outdated and fairly controversial (it is not contemplated by the law in 43 states of the U.S.[3]) some parents still resort to traditional surrogacy; especially for infertile mothers as well as parents in male same-sex relationships.

Gestational surrogacy, on the other hand, "relies more heavily on reproductive technology, for it involves the separation of genetic and gestational motherhood" (4). This way, the surrogate mother carries a baby that is not biologically related to her; the sperm and the egg used for the fecundation belong to the solicitor parents. Gestational surrogacy is the preferred method of surrogacy at the current moment (Surrogacy.com), as it guarantees a child that is biologically the parents' own and, if needed, gives them genetic rights that would help them keep their child in case the surrogate mother regretted her decision.

The concept of surrogacy (like that of adoption) is usually regarded as a selfless act, in which women offer their womb in order to help a couple conceive a child they are longing for. However, the debate surrounding surrogacy seems to center around the question: is the surrogate mother acting selflessly, or are her intentions lucrative? Supporters and detractors

[3]Traditional surrogacy is completely legal in the states of Florida, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, Virginia and Wisconsin. However, most states do not contemplate traditional surrogacy on their laws, so it is technically allowed but risky. (SurrogateFirst)

alike tend to appeal to the prospective surrogate mother's economic needs in order to prove their viewpoint. Detractors sustained that women in need of economic aid might become surrogate mothers in an act of desperation, perhaps not knowing what carrying a child might entail on a psychological level. In contrast, feminist theorists who support surrogacy as a valid work opportunity, consider the gestational process of a surrogate mother to be "simply an extension […] of baby-sitting and other child-care arrangements which are very widely practiced" (Newton qtd. in Shanley 7).

As of 2008, over 5.000 children were born from surrogacy agreements in the U.S. Today, surrogacy is one of the main options for parents who wish to raise a baby of their own, but whose biological factors have made it impossible to do so. In the U.S., different laws have been passed in regards to surrogacy agreements and in order to ensure the surrogate mother's wellbeing – as of today, candidates to be surrogate mothers are required to sign a "nearly 60-page application" (Frederick), and to complete a psychological exam. Prospective surrogate mothers should also have had children of their own and no desire of being mothers again. However, this practice is still widely banned in many countries around the world, as well as a big number of states in North America.

3. *Little Fires Everywhere* in Context

The preceding chapter has served as an illustration of some of the diverse means by which someone may become a mother, as well as the mothering methods that some may undertake. The works used for the analysis of this dissertation – the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* and its television adaptation – make an interesting source for the analysis of the treatment of these aspects and whatever nuances exist between the literary text and its TV adaptation.

3.1. The Novel and the TV Series: Celeste Ng and Liz Tigelaar

Celeste Ng was born on July 30th, 1980 in Pittsburg (Pennsylvania, USA). Ng is a first-generation Chinese-American, born to Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, who emigrated to North America in the 1960s ("Biography of Celeste Ng"). Her father is a physicist who worked for NASA, and her mother is a chemist who taught at Cleveland State University ("Celeste Ng").

Growing up in a predominantly white environment – that of the planned community of Shaker Heights (Ohio, USA), where she moved to when she was 10 years old – "Ng experienced feelings of isolation and estrangement" ("Biography of Celeste Ng"). After graduating from Shaker Heights High School in 1998, Ng went on to study English at Harvard University and then, she received a Master of Fine Arts in writing from the University of Michigan ("About Celeste").

Ng has written multiple short stories and essays, which have been published in renowned publications such as the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*. Insofar, Ng has published two novels, for which she has drawn inspiration from her own experiences as a woman of Asian origins growing up in a white community. Her debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), is a thriller depicting the life of a Chinese-American family in the suburbs of Ohio. Her

second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), follows two families whose lives intertwine in Ng's hometown, Shaker Heights.

Currently, Ng lives in Cambridge (Massachusetts, USA) with her husband and son ("Celeste Ng"). She is working as an executive producer in the TV adaptation of her debut novel, *Everything I Have Never Told You*. Her second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, has been adapted to the small screen as a limited mini-series for the American streaming service Hulu, by the developer Liz Tigelaar.

Rachel Elizabeth "Liz" Tigelaar was born on October 4th, 1975 in Washington D.C. (USA). Tigelaar was adopted as a child, which inspired her work as a developer for multiple television projects. She is a graduate in screenwriting and politics from the University of Ithaca ("Liz Tigelaar"). Tigelaar has been working as a screenwriter and producer since the year 2000, going on to develop two television shows on her own: *Life UneXpected* (2009-2011) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), based on Celeste Ng's bestselling novel. Both of Tigelaar's developing projects focus attention on issues regarding adoption and foster care, perhaps drawing inspiration from her experiences as an adoptee.

3.2. Shaker Heights: "A Suburban Utopia"

Almost the entirety of the action of both works (the novel and the TV show) are set in the suburb of Shaker Heights, in the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio. Through the narration, Shaker Heights acts as an agent whose role is fundamental for the characterization and development of the characters who constitute the story. The analysis of the setting is, therefore, essential for a deeper understanding of what the suburbs represent for North America and how its creation and development affected the lives of its residents.

Pleasant neighbors, white picket fences, and meticulously cut front lawns – for foreigners and residents alike there is, perhaps, no greater representation of North American culture than that of the Suburbs. The ever-increasing emigration of residents finding a new start

in the outskirts of major U.S. cities, has become a staple of American culture and reshaped what the American Dream means.

The effects of demobilization and rapid economic growth after World War II resulted in the spurt of the suburbs in the US, in fact "eighteen of the nation's top twenty-five cities suffered a net-loss of population between 1950 and 1970" (Jackson qtd. in Lesh 2). As a response to the economic stability in the country, factions such as the Federal Housing Authority made living in the suburbs more accessible for families who were determined to flee from cities to become homeowners. In addition to this, the American government also provided war Veterans with economic incentives, such as the G.I. Bill, to acquire single-family homes in the Suburbs. These changes, along with the growing production and widespread use of the automobile (which became a necessity right after the Second World War), favored the considerable growth of suburbia.

Prospective homeowners who wish to move into a suburban neighborhood, are commonly seeking a space that will distance them from the troubles they found in the cities (as well as from other elements, like the growing industries), looking for houses that can offer them the "'three S's': space, sanitation and security" (Stilgoe). Therefore, the houses that form a Suburban neighborhood tend to display a series of commodities that were not habitually found in other living places, not just "many large closets, but a cellar, an attic, a pantry, a back hall – even guest rooms" (Stilgoe). These commodities reflected the lifestyle of their owners, whose growing wealth situated them in the upper-middle class, and whose desire for neighbors that shared their same social position and interests became a priority. Many developers took advantage of the situation and created a series of suburbs specifically tailored for the upper classes –a series of planned communities that would ensure aesthetic perfection and strict laws for their residents, such as that of Shaker Heights, in Ohio.

However much praise suburban life has received through the years, these neighborhoods did not come without controversy, as there is a history of blatant racism behind some of the most famous Suburbs across the U.S. The majority of Americans who transitioned from major cities into the Suburbs did so in order to live in an environment that would still be racially segregated after many African Americans moved into the big cities from the rural South: the inhabitants of neighborhoods like Levittown, openly discussed the fact that they did not wish to see people of color living in their neighborhood. Although discriminatory laws (such as "restrictive racial covenants, which prevented owners from selling their property to members of various racial groups" (Lesh)) eventually became unconstitutional, many property owners refused to sell homes to African American people.

Shaker Heights, the main setting of *Little Fires Everywhere*, despite the efforts to make it seem integrating, had its fair of controversy regarding racial matters. As we learn in the TV show:

> Shaker Heights, known for its handsome boulevards and opulent homes, is credited for pioneering a truly integrated community. A suburban utopia where all races can live in harmony. Nowhere is the town's racial consciousness more evident than in the public schools, where courses on racial sensitivity are taught, and every sport is encouraged to have racial symmetry. But surface attempts to create equity mask a façade revealing a complicated history of racial and cultural tension. In the middle of the century, as Jewish and African American home buyers flocked to Shaker, for the utopia was promised, many white residents fled. And, after a bomb exploded in the garage of a new African American resident, the town's utopian image was shattered. To help boost its image, Shaker Heights soon implemented

> financial incentives to keep neighborhoods integrated. It was heralded as a progressive model for other cities to emulate (S1, E8, 12:30-13:50).

American suburbs still are considered staples in what constitutes American identity. Quoting Lesh: “the expansion of Suburban America was criticized for exactly what it did: it altered American political, social, and economic life in a substantial manner so that life after this change was substantially different than life after” (5-6)

4. Representations of Motherhood in *Little Fires Everywhere*

Little Fires Everywhere follows along the life of the Richardson family, who lives in a planned community in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. Their picture-perfect life is interrupted with the arrival of single mother Mia Warren and her daughter, Pearl, when Mrs. Richardson decides to rent them their second home.

Despite the wide variety of topics covered throughout the novel (race, social privilege…), *Little Fires Everywhere* is mainly concerned with family matters and dynamics and, especially, with the role of mothers. The novel depicts different approaches to mothering, the mothers' relationship to their children, and how they perceive themselves and other women as mothers. These diverse representations of motherhood, present both in the book and its television adaptation, are a clear image of the varying approaches to motherhood that exist today.

4.1. Elena Richardson: Motherhood as a Source for Identity

The catalyst of the action, Elena Richardson represents traditional motherhood and what it means to put motherhood at the center of one's identity. Elena has had her entire life mapped up since before she was a University student: "after graduation, a white wedding in Cleveland, a house in Shaker, lots of children, law school for him, a cub reportership for her – a plan they followed meticulously" (Ng 116). Mrs. Richardson's interest in carefully planning and crafting a so-called 'perfect' life is something that she inherited from her own mother (168) and that she shares with her town. Despite perceiving these qualities as a strength, there is a downside to them – not only do they make Elena Richardson into a controlling and extremely judgmental person, they also function as some sort of mask that hides the parts of her inherent personality that she had to sacrifice in order to pursue her vision of the perfect life.

For Mrs. Richardson, the pillar of this perfect life is motherhood – a role which she has welcomed with open arms and that she perceives as her greatest achievement and source of joy

but, at the same time, is the root of her deepest insecurities: “I take motherhood for granted sometimes. That they’ll love you forever. That they’ll love you at all” (S1, E2, 44:56-45:04). In spite of her insecurities (or, perhaps, even because of them) Elena Richardson clings to her role as a mother as the primary constituent of her identity; as a result, she judges other women based on their stances on the topic or their particular ways of mothering (especially if, like Mia’s, they are far from the norm).

Although the plot does not clearly state Elena’s wish to have children or how much her upbringing or her own mother influenced in this decision, it is abundantly clear that she loves her children, despite all of the ups and downs. Mrs. Richardson displays her love for her children in many instances in both works – she cooks for them, allows them to have their own freedom and space, worries for their wellbeing and is supportive of their endeavors (i.e.: she supports Lexie through her application process for Harvard). Perhaps it is her unconditional support what characterizes her as a loving mother (although she shows some “preferences” among her children), oftentimes referring to the choices and sacrifices that she has made for her children to have a comfortable life.

However, her children do not seem to reciprocate or acknowledge her nurturing (at least, not anymore). This is made clear through a conversation Elena has with Mia about her children on the TV show, in which she reflects on her children growing up and the changes that this has had on them and their relationship with her (as well as how it affected her):

> When they’re little, they, they need you so much. They hold you and grab for you and you cuddle them. She used to burrow into me. I was the thing she needed most in the world. And then they grow up, and… you don’t get to hold them, touch them like that. Even if you want to. And it’s like… learning to love the smell of an apple when all you want to do is grab it and hold it. Devour it. Seeds and all. And then, you

> realize it wasn't just that they needed you. You needed them. (S1, E2, 45:08-46:20)

Elena's children respect her and her opinions, however they do not feel as if she were open enough to share their troubles with her; this is especially evident in Lexie's abortion plot. Lexie is characterized as some sort of 'copy' of Mrs. Richardson's, she is really close to her mother (perhaps, the closest amongst her siblings) and shares most of Elena's opinions without questioning them. However, although the series (contrary to the novel) displays Lexie's attempts to come clean to her mother about her pregnancy scare, she never tells her mother about her abortion – nor does she go to her for support after the procedure; instead, she goes to Mia's home, a place that perhaps seems to her more open and safe, despite not having a close relationship to Mia.

Through the works, Mrs. Richardson speaks of her role as a mother as an experience, and her apparent enjoyment of said experience seems to point out that motherhood, for her, is far from the institution depicted by Rich. Provided that Elena made all of her choices regarding her life path – despite however much they were in agreement with society's expectations for women's lives at the time – her choices regarding motherhood were a strong point of divergence between the novel and the series. Ng writes of Elena's wish to become a mother (what's more, one of a large family) as something that she had longed for since she was a young girl. In fact, the book expands on this idea by adding Mr. and Mrs. Richardson's agreement on having children while they were young, so that Elena could work – a choice that was encouraged by her own mother, who believed that being a stay-at-home mother meant that she would be "wasting [her] potential" (Ng 123). This is portrayed on a completely different manner on the TV adaptation, which depicts Elena's choices regarding motherhood as not entirely her own, as explored in Episode 6: 'The Uncanny', which follows Elena Richardson's life as a young mother of three. Elena's wish to get back to work (and, perhaps, get a promotion)

after her third maternity leave is crushed when she finds out that she is pregnant with a fourth child. Determined to get back to work Elena considers getting an abortion, however she is held back by her mother, who tells her that she should quit working altogether:

> CAROLINE: You have money. And resources. And there is no reason that you can't have another baby.
>
> ELENA: Is not wanting another one a reason?
>
> CAROLINE: Not for people like us. (S1, E6, 21:18-21:32)

Elena's forceful abandonment of her professional dreams was canalized into resentment for her youngest daughter, with whom she has an estranged relationship that spans the entirety of the action. The detachment that she feels from this particular pregnancy is perhaps the first instance that led Elena Richardson to struggle with the idea of 'unconditional love'; something that, according to Rich, is expected to be inherent to any birth mother – a feeling of constant love for one's children, no matter the situation (Rich 23). This is particularly present in her relationship with Izzy, and is not as evident in her relationship with her other children or even with Pearl, whom she accepts as another one of her brood.

The fact that Elena is able to accept Pearl but rejects Izzy is particularly telling of her character. Mrs. Richardson opens her arms and her house to Pearl because she feels like her mother is not good enough to take care of her, as she is very far away from what she considers are the parameters that define what makes a 'good' mother. Elena has established herself as a good mother, someone who plays by the rules and does everything the way it is supposed to be done; through this view of herself, she judges other women based on their stances on the topic or their particular ways of mothering (especially if, like Mia's, they are far from the norm). According to Rich, this is a common occurrence amongst mothers who find their main source of identity in mothering: "women who identify themselves primarily as mothers may seem both

threatening and repellent to those who don't" (237). Throughout the action, Mrs. Richardson seems to judge her fellow mothers based on their aptitudes for the role, as well as the women around her who do not wish to become mothers – she speaks of one of her friends as "allergic to children" (S1, E3, 34:50-34:55).

Through "mothering" Pearl, Mrs. Richardson is able to take on the role of the traditional mother, something that she cannot do with Izzy. Ng establishes the basis of Elena and Izzy's rocky relationship by recounting Izzy's health struggles throughout her childhood; Elena's fixation with Izzy's behavior is, therefore, rooted in her struggle with having a 'different' child, one that requires more attention and a different kind of mothering than she was used to:

> She had learned, with Izzy's birth, how your life could trundle around on its safe little track and then, with no warning, skid spectacularly off course. Every time Mrs. Richardson looked at Izzy, that feeling of things spiraling out of control coiled around her again, like a muscle she didn't know how to unclench. (Ng 126)

This is completely different in the series, as the TV show establishes Elena's struggles with Izzy by making her daughter into a result of an unplanned pregnancy and focusing on the consequences that this had on her career. In addition to this, Izzy's reactive personality, which challenges her mother's rules and society's conventions (Izzy is not just an artistic woman, but also queer in the series), adds to Mrs. Richardson's struggle with 'unconditional love' towards her youngest daughter. Although the reasons for this diverge from the book to the series, both of them single out Izzy as a child that is different, and whose unique needs and personality create a struggle for Elena as a mother: "sometimes it's really challenging. […] It's hard being your mom" (S1, E7, 37:44-37:50).

Mia's arrival, and the fact that she is able to form a bond with Izzy that Elena has never been able to, further challenge her. As stated by Rich, the division between mothers and mother figures seems to be a common feature in estranged mother-daughter relationships in which the daughter has some sort of artistic inclinations; one in which the mother, much like Mrs. Richardson, would have "preferred and valued a more conventional daughter or a son" (Rich 229). In fact, this is expressed in the book:

> Though she would never quite articulate it this way, resentment began to sheathe concern. ANGER IS FEAR'S BODYGUARD, a poster in the hospital had read, but Mrs. Richardson had never noticed it; she was too busy thinking, *It wasn't supposed to happen this way*. (Ng 126)

In the end, Elena and Izzy's relationship becomes more estranged than in the beginning, as both of them emotionally draw barriers between them (and, as in the end, Izzy escapes home):

> IZZY: Mia was the one person who actually cared about me. I just want her to be my mom. A mom who actually loved me. A mom who is nothing like you!
>
> ELENA: Do you think I wanted a daughter like you? I never wanted you in the first place! (S1, E8, 49:21-49:35)

However, Elena's deep struggles with Izzy seem to go deeper than her worries or prejudice. Ng establishes Elena and Izzy's similarities in character quite early on in the novel:

> In fact, she reminded Mr. Richardson of her mother, when she'd been younger: he'd been drawn to that spark, that certainty of purpose, how she always knew her mind and had a plan, how deeply concerned she was with right versus wrong – the fiery side of her that seemed, after

> so many safe years in the suburbs, to have cooled down to embers. (Ng 128)

Mrs. Richardson seems to resent some of the choices that she has made throughout her life (both regarding her career and her lifestyle), and she chooses Izzy as the victim for all of the anger that she has for herself, as she sees parts of herself that she has worked so hard to repress reflected in her daughter. Her professional inclinations are almost parallel to Izzy's artistic passion; however, she left a promising career behind for the sake of what was 'the right thing to do'. Mrs. Richardson's suffocating efforts to control Izzy are somehow mirroring the way in which she has suffocated her own identity:

> "It's okay, Elena," he would say to Mrs. Richardson. "She's fine. Let her be." Mrs. Richardson, however, could not let Izzy be, and the feeling coalesced in all of them: Izzy pushing, her mother restraining, and after a time no one could remember when the dynamic had started, only that it had existed always. (128)

By the end of the story, Mrs. Richardson's efforts to keep a seemingly perfect façade, as well as her meticulous mothering techniques, have failed her. The house fire that puts an end to the story happens differently in the book than in its TV adaptation; in the first one, the fire is solely set by Izzy, while in the latter, it is all of the Richardson children who do it. In the novel, Izzy uses the fire as a way of expressing her discontent with her mother's decisions, but also in order to set herself free from her restraints. In both instances, the fire that is set seems to be part of a greater metaphor set by Ng, one that uses this physical fire as a representation of the emotional fire that appeared as a consequence of Mrs. Richardson's actions: as a mother and as a 'friendly' neighbor. Ng's end to the story seems to point out multiple things in the end, as some sort of critique; Shaker Heights began to shake off its façade as soon as the conflicts between neighbors started to take place, while Mrs. Richardson's life fell apart as soon as her

children turned her back on her – stripping her of the only source of identity she has ever known. As Izzy runs away in the end, Mrs. Richardson is also left without the parts of her old self that were represented by the presence of her daughter; parts of her that (as hinted by Elena's lifelong search for Izzy) she might be able to get back.

4.2. Mia Warren: the Intersection of Black and Surrogate Mothering

Mia Warren is presented as the antagonist to Mrs. Richardson, in all scopes of life: her beliefs and ways of life present a threat not only to the artificial order established in Shaker Heights, but also to Elena Richardson's conservative views. As the narrative advances, all the layers of Mia's character – she is an artist and a single mother – are slowly revealed, and her past decisions come back to haunt her. To all of these layers that compose Mia's personality, the TV adaptation adds another crucial element by the casting of Mia as a black woman. After Ng sent an anticipated copy of the book to production company Hello Sunshine (created by actress Reese Witherspoon, who would go along to play Mrs. Richardson) in hopes that she would produce it as a TV show (Vineyard 17), Witherspoon sent a copy to fellow actress Kerry Washington, to get her on board with the project, after years of wanting to work alongside her (ET Canada, 0:40-0:58). Washington's addition to the cast completely changed Mia's narrative as well as the racial and social considerations that the series would explore – especially how these related to motherhood. The decision to make Mia into a black woman and explore how her race conditioned her mothering style was welcomed both by Ng and Tigelaar. On the one hand, Ng celebrated this change, as she had the intention to write Mia as a woman of color in the book, however she "just didn't feel like [she] was the right person to try and write a black woman's experience" (Vineyard 17); for the author, the producer's decision to cast Kerry Washington "told [her] they were looking at the book in exactly the right way" (17). On the other hand, Tigelaar considered this substantial change as "a really exciting part of the adaptation because it gave [them] a real opportunity to tell the story of how Mia would feel

about this white family, about the type of mother she is to her daughter, and how that might be different than how a white mother parents a white daughter" (Fernandez). In addition to this, the re-imagining of Mia as a black woman is also particularly important in the way it influences her relationships with other characters and how it makes the narrative open for the exploration of the racial narratives, microaggressions and 'colorblindness' that characterized the 1990s (ATX TV 18:40-19:55).

Although the reader does not have this information at the beginning of the action, Mia's daughter, Pearl, was conceived through surrogacy, with Mia being her birthmother. When the University she was attending denied her a scholarship to continue her studies, the opportunity to become a surrogate mother was presented to Mia: a wealthy couple, Joseph and Madeline Ryan, who were unable to have children, found her fit for the role as she highly resembled Mrs. Ryan (Ng 245). The fact that Mia is depicted as a woman of color in the TV series makes the Ryans into a wealthy, black couple who are seeking a surrogate agreement – this way, the TV adaptation avoids the stereotypes surrounding the type of intended parents that usually seek these arrangements (for the most part considered to be white and/or male same-sex couples), as explored in Chapter 2. In addition to this, this subtle change in the narrative leaves the door open for a discussion around black women's infertility issues which, hidden under the popular belief that deems black women as exceptionally fertile, could not be farther from reality. In fact, black women are "almost twice as likely to experience infertility as white women" (Thompson) as studies suggest, but they are less likely to seek medical help. Equally, the number of black surrogate mothers remains low (Meadows-Fernandez). However, in the TV Show, Mia took the generous offer and carried the pregnancy with no attachment to the child whatsoever, despite its being a traditional surrogacy (in which, as previously discussed, the baby was genetically her own). However, Mia's initial intentions to part with the baby at its

birth swiftly changed as she learnt of her brother's tragic death and of her parents' opposition to her surrogacy; she wrote a letter to the Ryans faking the baby's death and vanished forever.

Mia's decision to become a mother, despite having no intention to do so, is potentially influenced by the last conversation that she had with her brother. As depicted in both sources of analysis Mia's brother, Warren, was not on board with Mia's decision of giving up the baby she was gestating:

> "If you'd asked me, I'd have told you not to."
>
> "Just don't tell mom and dad," Mia said again.
>
> "I won't," Warren said at last. "But I'll tell you this, I'm the baby's uncle. And I don't like it." (Ng 258)

In the TV show, the conversation turns into one about Mia's purpose. Whilst Pauline Hawthorne, Mia's mentor, considers that she should focus on her career: "Anyone can be a mother. Few can do what your sister does" (S1, E6, 26:42-26:50). Warren believes that God has set a plan for Mia and, before leaving, reluctantly tells her that perhaps the baby was God's plan all along – the thing that Mia would make that would change the world. Warren's sudden passing led Mia to leave the life she had been living in New York City, and to put things into perspective, abruptly dropping out of university and driving across the country to deliver her baby, whom she would give the last name 'Warren', in honor of her late brother. The change of her last name, taking Warren's car to drive away from home (Ng 263) but, most importantly, deciding to keep her baby may point to Mia's need for a connection with her brother, the most important tie to her old life that she wished to preserve forever.

Mia's actions in relation to Pearl are the primary cause of disruption through her life. In the series, Mia still has nightmares about Mr. Ryan finding and approaching her. Her past mostly affects the way in which she sees the relationship that she has with Pearl, as she constantly seems to wonder whether her decision to keep her was the right one for her daughter.

Mia feels possessive over Pearl, and she displays it on many occasions: "You're my child. I can take as many pictures of you as I want" (S1, E1, 18:36-18:39); as well as when she recounts her story to Bebe Chow and states: "I took her and ran. Because she's mine. Not his" (S1, E7, 19:32-19:53). Mia's questioning of her past decisions is also present not just in her rivalry with Mrs. Richardson, but in her choice to support Bebe Chow through her case:

> 'What a hypocrite you are. You stole that couple's child and then you tried to take a baby away from the McCulloughs.'
>
> 'Pearl is *my* child.'
>
> 'You had a little help making her, didn't you?' Mrs. Richardson raised an eyebrow. 'Linda McCullough and I have been friends for years. She's like a sister to me. And no one deserves a child more than she does.'
>
> 'It's not a question of deserving. I just think a mother has a right to raise her own child.'
>
> 'Do you? Or is that just what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night?' (Ng 349)

Throughout the narration (on both sources), it is made clear that Mia's ulterior motives for helping Bebe win her case are rooted on her decision to keep Pearl. Although she does not feel completely confident on her decisions, part of her wants to believe that she was right in making them, therefore she uses Bebe's case as a way of proving this; however, their situations are not that similar. For instance, Mia's advocacy of a birthmother's right to raise her child seems to be in agreement with her own situation with Pearl, as she took her right as a biological mother and decided to raise her baby on her own. Nonetheless, May Ling's biological father did not want to perform as such whilst Pearl's father did want to have her, which makes it a

completely different experience – this is something that Mia has hidden from Pearl: "My dad didn't want me? Lie. He wanted me so bad that you had to steal me away from him. (…) You told my father, who wanted me, that his kid was dead" (S1, E8, 6:55-7:22).

Both the book and the series begin by portraying Mia and Pearl's relationship as one of mutual respect and closeness, which appears to be strengthened by their time spent alone on the road, living as nomads for the entirety of Pearl's life. As a young, single, black mother Mia has gone through many obstacles to provide a worthy life for herself and her daughter, assuming nurturing and economic responsibilities on her own. Like most mothers of color (as stated in the theoretical analysis of this dissertation) Mia's mothering emphasizes the idea of "preservative love" – which prioritizes ensuring her child's (physical) wellbeing over other aspects of their relationship, such as her daughter's emotional or nurturing needs. This, although depicted in the TV series, is never present throughout the novel perhaps because of the strong relation of these mothering 'traits' to African American mothers and Mia's racial ambiguity in the book. In episode 1 Pearl, along with Moody Richardson (the youngest Richardson boy), trespasses a landfill and is taken home by the police. Mia becomes so upset with Pearl's reckless behavior putting herself in danger, that she calls her "careless and stupid" (S1, E1, 44:50-44:56), and reiterates the differences between them and the Richardsons, who do not have to worry about their physical wellbeing because they get (racial) "passes" (S1, E1, 45:31-45:45). In occasions like this, Mia's mothering does not merely reflect her preoccupations about Pearl's physical wellbeing, but also her intrinsic need to educate her daughter on racial matters: Mia's way of nurturing her daughter is through racial education; this is the tool she provides her with in order to survive in a racist society. This is an experience she shares with the Averys, Brian's (Lexie Richardson's boyfriend) parents. Despite their strikingly different backgrounds, Brian's parents are Princeton graduates working traditional jobs (a doctor and a lawyer) and live in a 'traditional' household (although it is not stated if it

is a nuclear household, as it is the case for the Richardsons), it is made clear throughout the novel as well as the series that they have also made a priority in raising Brian to give him the education he would need to survive not just in a racist society, but also in a 'colorblind', predominantly white community. Although not so much in the book – again, most likely due to Mia's racial ambiguity and/or the fact that race is not so intrinsically present as in the TV adaptation – the show frequently shows Brian's awareness of the microaggressions and colorblindness of the people around him, especially the Richardsons. He jokingly tells Pearl: "you must like rap and basketball too" (S1, E3, 10:33-10:47) when Mrs. Richardson appears surprised that they do not know each other and, as her comments grow more hurtful, also confronts Lexie on her covert racism:

> BRIAN: […] when we are hanging out, doing whatever, do you see me as a black guy? […] What do you see me as?
>
> LEXIE: I don't fucking know! I don't know. As a person, I guess. I wasn't raised to see people as fucking colors.
>
> BRIAN: But you, you see me as a football player. And-and a 17 year old guy and someone who got into Princeton, right? […] So why can't you see me as black?
>
> LEXIE: Why are you doing this? You're trying to make me feel like I'm this bad person and I'm not a bad person. Do you think that I'm a racist or something? Would I be dating you if I was? I mean, my grandma integrated Shaker. My mom fucking marched-
>
> BRIAN: Marched with Dr. King? Yeah, I know, Lexie. Your mom brings it up every time I walk into this house. That's exactly why I fucking hate coming here. Whenever I tell people I got into Princeton…

> the first thing that goes through their head is, "Oh. It's because he's black." But when you get into Yale…? They don't think it's because you stole a black girl's story (S1, E7, 48:15-19:43).

Nonetheless Brian's family, despite suffering from racial underprivilege, enjoy a series of privileges that are not available for Mia and Pearl – the Averys' position as well-respected members of the community as well as their evident wealth freed Brian of certain struggles that Pearl still goes through; for instance, the situation in which the school would not let her take AP classes, as "they discourage minorities from taking AP classes" (S1, E2, 26:50-27:03) something that, as a graduate that has been accepted into Princeton, was not Brian's case. As a result of this privilege, the Averys do not show apparent concern in physical wellbeing, as Mia does with Pearl.

Nevertheless, as the action progresses, Mia and Pearl's relationship begins to appear fractured. Pearl is not entirely satisfied with her mother's mothering, often feeling neglected, as if she were not a priority in her life (like her children are for Mrs. Richardson) (S1, E1, 46:15-46:24) because she seems to prioritize her art above everything else. However, Pearl's vision of their lives is flawed, as she does not really know about her mother's past: "'She doesn't talk about it much. I don't think she had any family left anymore.' In truth, Pearl had never had the courage to ask Mia directly about her origins, and Mia had reflected her roundabout questions with ease" (Ng 168). As a result, Pearl is not aware of the sacrifices that her mother had to make in order to keep her, especially regarding her work. Thus, she clings onto this idea of Mrs. Richardson as a self-sacrificing mother, something that she does not seem to find on Mia, and admires her for the sacrifices she has made for the sake of her children. As previously discussed, before Warren's death and Mia's consequent decision to keep her baby, she was one of the best students in her class, on track to become

a renowned artist, as stated by her teacher and mentor, Pauline Hawthorne: "Do you realize that your sister is one of the most talented artists I have ever met?" (S1, E6, 26:38-26:42)

Pearl is not content either with the life they have been living together, believing her mother "acts like being poor makes you a better person" (S1, E7, 31:49-39:51). She also considers that she "always had what [she] needed, but never what [she] wanted" (S1, E7, 41:08-41:17). Pearl's fears of coming second are heightened when the Richardson daughters come along, seeking a mother figure and finding it in Mia who, by taking them in, appears to be practicing what has been previously disclosed as "othermothering". The youngest Richardson, Izzy, finds in Mia the accepting, artistically driven mother figure that she could never find in her own mother; Mia opens her arms and her house to her, and helps her with her most personal issues: "[…] she thought about the first day she'd met Mia, what Mia had asked her: *What are you going to do about it?* It was the first time Izzy had felt there *was* something she could do about anything" (Ng 373). Mia also holds Izzy accountable for her privilege in regarding her class and race, something that her mother could never see:

> I: I don't know, I guess it was about how we think of other people as less. How we, we don't value them. How… people like my mom and the McCulloughs and everybody from Shaker, they think they can just buy whatever they want.
>
> M: But you're part of Shaker too, right? This place made you. You're not an exception because you want to be. (S1, E7, 44:08-44:38)

In addition to "othermothering" Izzy, Mia also takes in Lexie Richardson when she is at her most vulnerable after having an abortion. Despite her great relationship with her mother, whom she mirrors in many aspects of her personality, Lexie does not feel safe letting her know about her unexpected pregnancy: "Her mother would be mortified. There would be shame and there would be pity, and Lexie knew she was not equipped to withstand either one" (Ng 203).

Neither does she feel like she can tell her longtime friend, Serena Wong, about it. Instead, she calls Pearl to accompany her to the clinic and, later on, goes to Mia's house for her recovery. Although she is open and caring in both the novel and the series, there is a certain layer of anger and resentment that prevents Mia from being totally welcoming to Lexie in the TV show. The book, however, portrays Mia and Lexie having a series of difficult conversations surrounding the topic:

> "Do you think I made a huge mistake?" She gulped. "Do you think I'm a horrible person?" […]
>
> "Would you have been ready to be a good mother?" Mia asked. "The kind of mother you'd have wanted to be? The kind of mother a child deserves?" […]
>
> "You'll always be sad about this," Mia said softly. "But it doesn't mean you made the wrong choice. It's just something that you have to carry." […]
>
> "But do you think I made the wrong choice?" Lexie persisted. She felt sure Mia would know. […]
>
> "I don't know, Lexie," she said. "I think you're the only one who can know that." (Ng 282-283)

Mia also imparts some of that "othermothering" into Bebe, despite their closeness in age. Although she has some ulterior motives for helping her, as discussed in the early parts of this section, Mia feels protective over Bebe and her case, over her situation as a young, single mother and as a member of an oppressed minority. Mia wholeheartedly believes in Bebe's rightful claim to May Ling, and empathizes with her, as their situations are somehow similar. In court, she justifies her investing so much of her into Bebe's story: "because I know what it

feels like for a child to come from my body. To be made of what I'm made of. To be so much a part of you that you cannot fathom them not being a part of you" (S1, E7, 34:14-34:30).

Mia's feud with Mrs. Richardson, which could be considered the core of the action, appears to be rooted in their evident differences – their socioeconomic backgrounds, their races (on the TV series), their parenting styles and their sides on the Chow-McCullough case are just some of the breaches that divide them. Their daughters further help widen the gap that exists between them; whilst Izzy finds in Mia a source of inspiration and a confidante and Lexie goes to her to find sympathy and a home without judgments, Pearl finds in Mrs. Richardson someone to look up to, and a mother that puts her children's needs before her. Although their differences outweigh their similarities, Mia and Elena share more than it is apparent – despite their different parenting styles, they put their children's needs above everyone else; in addition to this, both of them are struggling mothers. As Mia puts it on the show: "All mothers struggle. Money hides it. So you can buy a nanny or a tutor, vacations… But you can't put a price on a mother's love for their child. Even though some might try" (S1, E7, 31:17-31:41).

As a character, Mia Warren is one of the most complex of the action, with an extremely rich backstory, which is made even richer by the additions made by the TV adaptation, regarding the explorations and implications of her race. Her backstory as a surrogate mother deciding to break her agreement and live as a nomad, after being disowned by her parents, gives her the perspective and empathy to support Bebe Chow on her endeavors, trying to get her birth daughter back. In addition to this, being depicted as a black mother on the TV show, Mia's experiences mothering her daughter are particularly interesting, as they differ from those carried out by traditional, 'nuclear' mothers on the TV show, such as Elena Richardson or Linda McCullough and, in spite of their similarities, even to the kind of parenting received by Brian Avery, whose experience as a black child was shadowed by his economic privilege and social status in the community.

4.3. Linda McCullough: Adoptive Mothering

Despite her active presence throughout the book, as her story takes up almost the entirety of the action, Linda McCullough's story seems almost incidental on the series – just another layer of Elena and Mia's complicated relationship. However, Linda McCullough is a crucial character in terms of representation, as she portrays adoptive mothers and their struggles.

Both in the book and the series alike, Linda is introduced on the event of her adoptive daughter Mirabelle's[4] first birthday. However, in the TV show, viewers are introduced to her story before ever seeing her, when Elena tells her story to Mia after she enquires about the magnitude of the celebration: "It's sort of been a process for Linda and Mark. They tried for so long to get pregnant, decades, even. And all of their friends had kids in their twenties, like me, and it was just heartbreak after heartbreak for her" (S1, E3, 21:23). We learn, then, that Linda's journey to motherhood had not been an easy one. Mrs. McCullough's early experiences with motherhood had been surrounded by pain, grief, and loss:

> After their wedding, she'd gotten pregnant right away. And then, after a few weeks, she'd begun bleeding, and she knew even before they consulted the doctor that the baby was gone. […] it happened again, and again four months after that, and again five months after *that* (Ng 150).

As a result of her feelings and frustrations, overtime Mrs. McCullough grew resentful of other pregnant women, especially Elena Richardson, who had had three successful pregnancies and felt ungrateful that she was having a fourth child (S1, E6, 18:02): "Elena, you have four healthy children that came to you easily, that no one can ever take away, okay? So just don't tell me that you know how I feel" (S1, E4, 4:45). Similarly, in the novel:

[4] For the clarity of the analysis, I will use the name Mirabelle (the McCullough's given name for their baby) when I analyze her presence in Linda McCullough's story. I will use the name May Ling (the baby's original, Chinese name, given by her birthmother) when speaking of her in relation to Bebe Chow.

> She began to hate pregnant women. She wanted to slap them, to throw things at them, to grab them by the shoulders and bite them […] Mr. McCullough […] could not recognize this woman, so callous, so different from the endlessly maternal woman he'd always known (Ng 152).

In the end, after multiple failed attempts and various medical diagnoses – they had been told that "even IVF would likely fail" (Ng 152) – Mr. and Mrs. McCullough decided to adopt a baby.

Mrs. McCullough's experience – both physical and psychological – follows a particularly common pattern amongst adoptive mothers. Struggles with infertility and miscarriages are key factors that lead women to pursue adoption as a possible route, although it is not always the case. In addition, Linda's feelings towards pregnant women are also a seemingly common experience for infertile mothers, who are said to project feelings of "envy and competition toward fertile women" (Kupfermann qtd. in Katz and Hunt 78). After filing for adoption, however, the McCulloughs' struggles did not come to an end. Every time an opportunity to adopt seemed to come up, there was always a problem with the baby they had been assigned, so they almost lost all their hope; up until Mirabelle was found outside a fire station.

As a mother, Linda McCullough is caring and attentive and her privileged economic and social position allows her to provide for her daughter with everything that she might need. However, there are some aspects of Mirabelle's caring that Linda, unfortunately, has failed to provide – those regarding the racial aspects of raising a racialized child. In fact, when taken to court by Bebe's lawyer, these are the factors that weigh on her "unfitness" as a mother to a child of color.

Despite not having enough knowledge or 'training' on her baby's birth culture – as Mr. and Mrs. McCullough adopted their baby in a very sudden manner: "out of the blue the social worker calls them at ten thirty in the morning […] and by four o'clock in the afternoon there she is in their house" (Ng 130) – it was expected that Mrs. McCullough introduced elements of the child's birth culture into their life, so that the baby could assimilate them as part of her identity. Mrs. McCullough does not appear to have any knowledge about her daughter's birth culture when cross-examined by Ed Lim, Bebe Chow's lawyer:

> ED: How are you at present trying to connect May Ling to her birth culture?
>
> LINDA: Uh, well, she's only one. So we haven't really started yet but, eventually. (S1, E7, 7:55-8:07)

Mrs. McCullough backs up the fact that she does not know about her daughter's culture by stating that she is still only a baby. In the book, Mrs. McCullough is questioned by Lim on whether she has studied Chinese culture or history prior to her daughter's adoption, to which she answers: "It's very important for us that Mirabelle stays connected to her birth culture. But we think the most important thing is that she has a loving home, with two loving parents" (Ng 299). Linda McCullough is depicting with this affirmation the double vision that she experiences with her child. Like most transracial adoptive mothers, Linda struggles with the "double vision" (Livingston qtd. in Kutz and Hunt 73) that she has of her child – of seeing her as someone with a special identity that needs support to assimilate, and as a child who deserves to be treated in a colorblind[5] manner:

> LINDA: Look, Mark and I don't pretend to be experts in Chinese culture. We…

[5]Colorblindness is the belief that race should not be considered as a factor when mentioning race on a daily basis, as well as deciding what role it should have in other spheres such as education, "public policy and legal adjudication" (Plaut qtd. in Apfelbaum et al. 205)

> ED: Forget about being an expert. What about just acknowledging it?
>
> LINDA: I mean, we are, but race isn't everything. It's not the only thing that matters here.
>
> ED: What box did you check as your race preference on your adoption paperwork?
>
> LINDA: We checked the box for a white child. Um, like any parents, when we sought to adopt, we had certain ideas of who our child would be. But, you know, when Mirabelle needed a family, we didn't ask what race she was. It didn't matter. When we held her in our arms, the notions of… who we thought our child would be just melted away. I mean… she was perfect. (S1, E7, 8:55-9:58)

Linda McCullough's journey to motherhood proved to be one full of hardships, which did not particularly improve whenever she became a mother. The scrutiny and judgment received by adoptive mothers (especially, those of racialized children), their lack of biological ties and other factors, such as the lack of connection she felt to her child in regards to ethnic and cultural aspects, prompted Mrs. McCullough to struggle to consider herself as a real mother; this is a common struggle amongst adoptive mothers.

4.4. Bebe Chow: Birthmothers

Just like birthmothers have been overlooked through history, Bebe Chow's story is almost entirely filtered through other characters' points of view – the supporters and the detractors who are judges of her fitness as a mother and openly discuss the motives that led her to abandon her child. Bebe Chow's story, in what relates to motherhood, is surrounded by a huge amount of controversy.

As an illegal immigrant, Bebe Chow lived on the scarce wages of the jobs that were available to her, barely having enough to pay for basic amenities:

> Bebe had been in the country only two years by the time her baby was born, and in Cleveland for barely one. She had held three apartments […], had broken the lease on one and had been chronically short on rent on another, and had never held a job that paid more than minimum wage. […] One month she had paid in full and then hadn't had enough money for groceries and electricity: what a thing, to choose between hunger and darkness. (Ng 293)

When she learned that she was pregnant, the precarious situation that she was living in left her with no other options but to have the baby – she did not know how to contact a doctor nor how to speak proper English in order to communicate. Despite feeling prepared to nurture and parent a baby, her economic status was not favorable enough to provide for a newborn: "Bebe had no money for diapers. […] she had spent her last seven dollars on formula" (Ng 291). Once May Ling was born, her mental health declined, most likely due to *postpartum depression*, as it is hinted in the TV show: "Do you know this term 'postpartum depression'?" (S1, E7, 9:50-9:54).

All of these circumstances left her no choice but to abandon her baby, in hopes to give her a better life: "When she looked down, she saw no safety net […] Could you blame her for tucking her daughter onto a safety ledge while she herself plummeted?" (Ng 292). Bebe left her baby, whom she had named May Ling,[6] on a cold, January morning, at a fire station (Ng 292); that same morning, a social worker found a new home for her with the McCulloughs. Despite trying to find her daughter for months after relinquishing her, Bebe eventually gave up – that was until Mia Warren came along, informed her of her birthchild's whereabouts and provided her with the tools and support she would need to find her and get her back.

[6]Once again, for the clarity of the analysis, I will refer to Bebe Chow's baby (Linda McCullough's adoptive child) with the child's given name, May Ling.

Despite her wishes to be a mother, Bebe's trauma has made her not feel like a "real" or a "good" mother anymore:

> BEBE: Sometimes…I still hear her cry.
>
> MIA: Of course you do, because you are her mother.
>
> BEBE: She gone. I'm not her mother anymore.
>
> MIA: Bebe, a mother is a motherand you will always be hers.
>
> BEBE: I leave her. I do that. It doesn't matter what I want. (S1, E3, 5:23-5:56)

However, with Mia's persuasion and economic aid, she is led to take legal action to find her child, something that – as she testifies – was never offered to her in the first place: "I beg them 'please find her, please help me to find her' but they say nothing they can do. They told me I gave up all my rights when I leave her there" (S1, E7, 10:21-10:33). This adheres to the narrative that portrays birthmothers as women who have stopped being mothers altogether, and whose feelings are invalidated.

Bebe's story is thoroughly analyzed along the trial scenes, both in the book and the TV show. Although her reasons for the relinquishment of her child are questioned and ruled out as the consequence of "a postpartum break" (S1, E7, 12:27-12:38) by the defendant (Mr. McCullough), Bebe's decision was based on sheer desperation. As a woman of color, Bebe's mothering style (quite similar to Mia's on the series) profoundly emphasized the idea of 'preservative love' – what she wanted for her daughter, over anything else, was the safety and comfort that was never granted for her as a single, poor, mother of color. The impact that economic status and race have on someone's mothering style (as previously analyzed) is not something that is considered by the defense, who holds a position of privilege and looks at the issues from a white, upper-middle class point of view. The reasons for judging Bebe's fitness as a mother lay primarily in her economic situation and the state in which she abandoned her

daughter; however, whenever she tries to advocate for something that she can provide for her – love – that is not seen as enough:

> Could she reasonably hope to support a child […] would she and her child not become a drain on the community's resources? (But there would be love, too, so much love. […] It was enough for the basics: rent, food, clothes. How did you weigh a mother's love against the cost of raising a child?)
>
> Mark and Linda McCullough, it was quite clear, had all the necessary resources for raising a child. […] While in their care, the baby had been well clothed, well fed and well cared for. […] Furthermore, the McCulloughs had shown themselves to be especially devoted to raising a child. (Ng 295-296)

Bebe ends up losing the case against the McCulloughs, who take May Ling home with them as Bebe's lawyer proclaims: "It is the most egregious interpretation of 'in the best interest of the child' I have ever witnessed" (S1, E8, 26:03-26:17). After the verdict is out, Bebe sets off to Mia's house, in which a saddened Mia is ready to comfort her, as depicted in the novel:

> "She will always be your child," Mia said to Bebe, taking her hand. "You will always be her mother. Nothing will ever change that." […] Later she would realize that Bebe must have heard this differently. That she must have heard, in these words, a permission granted. (Ng 341-342)

As reflected in this passage, Mia's words seemed to accidentally have ignited a spark inside of Bebe, who decided to claim her baby on her own and take the matters into her own hands – by kidnapping May Ling and flying back to China with her. Perhaps Bebe's actions were a form

of rebellion against the cruel situation in which she had been involved; by taking her daughter with her (to whom she believed to have a claim no matter what the court had decided), Bebe is for once taking the reins of her own life and not waiting for someone else's permission to start living the way she had always wanted. In a way, her decision parallels that of Mia's when she decided to raise Pearl on her own.

To conclude, it is important to note the fact that Bebe is a victim of depersonalization (D'Arcy); only being seen as part of a transaction and not as a real, biological mother who should have some sort of claim in her child's life. By taking May Ling with her, Bebe Chow is regaining the power that had been taken from her as a part of this transaction, and establishing herself as a 'real' mother, one that is entitled to raise her own daughter. In the end, Bebe's claim to May Ling goes into a much deeper debate about who is entitled to parent; to quote from Ng (297): "It came, over and over, down to this. What made someone a *mother*? Was it biology alone, or was it love?"

5. Conclusions

The primary aim of this dissertation was to analyze the representations of motherhood in the novel and TV show *Little Fires Everywhere*, in order to determine what the various ways in which motherhood is conceived and to what extent do racial matters and economic status affect the processes of mothering.

The planned community of Shaker Heights, a suburb outside the city of Cleveland, serves as a background for this story in which its strict rules and seemingly perfect order – so important to its neighbors – are threatened by a series of conflicts that arise through the narrative and create an atmosphere of destruction for the families involved. These conflicts and their consequences fall almost entirely in the figures of four mothers – Elena Richardson, Mia Warren, Linda McCullough and Bebe Chow.

In order to determine the types of motherhood and what intrinsic characteristics set each one of them apart, I carried out a close reading of the novel, focusing especially on the figures of the characters; then, I analyzed them on the TV series and compared and contrasted their narratives in both sources. The character of Elena Richardson, in her role as a mother, served as a good foundation for the analysis of the rest of the characters, as her experience thoroughly reflects that of a traditional mother, raising her children in a nuclear household, who is sheltered under her racial and economic privilege – despite the complexities of her identity and her individual struggles. In the case of Mia Warren, her character was especially complex and her narrative very unique; her experiences as a surrogate mother were particularly interesting, as she was not the prototypical surrogate mother (especially on the TV series) and her mothering style was made completely different by the decision of the TV adaptation to interpret her as a black woman. In the case of the last two mothers – Linda McCullough and Bebe Chow – their stories appear intertwined, and their legal battle to gain custody of Mirabelle/May Ling was

especially telling in order to determine the extent to which external elements to motherhood (those of race and class) interfere with the decisions to consider a woman a 'good' or a 'bad' mother.

Although the novel sets the ground for conversations about the intersection of motherhood, race and class, the TV show further elaborates on the idea by making Mia and Pearl (as well as her intended parents) people of color – thus, setting the scene for a series of uncomfortable situations dealing with race and privilege. All in all, both the novel and the TV series made really good source materials for analysis, due to all of the individual stories of the characters, the way they intertwined with one another and all of the different types of motherhood represented.

The analysis of some of the characters could have been expanded had there been more literature on the subject, particularly in what relates to the narratives of adoptive and birth mothers. It is also the case for surrogate mothers, as literature on the topic tends to focus on particular cases but not so much on their experiences.

In addition to this, the methodology and the thesis of this dissertation could be used for other works that have mothers as the center of the narrative. For instance, a similar analysis could be performed about the novel and TV series *Big Little Lies*.

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