**Generating Intimacy: Rage, Female Friendship and the Heteropatriarchal Household in TV post #MeToo**

Post-2016 television shows that focus on female friendships offer a significant departure from the postfeminist whiteness of TV girlfriendships in the 2000s which coalesced around a policing gaze and an entrepreneurial spirit (Winch 2013). Popular postfeminist culture highlighted girliness, homemaking and the affects of serenity (Negra 2009) and was imbued with a postfeminist sensibility that centred an ideal body image (read white, thin, wealthy) and positive affect (Gill 2007). But following the 2008 crash, the recession, and attendant austerities that have hit women, people of colour and young people the hardest, we see a shift in how women are portrayed as being intimate with one another. Amy Dobson and Akane Kanai observe the "affective dissonances" – including insecurity, anger, and anxiety – of post-recessional media and argue that disappointment and dissatisfaction run through these shows, puncturing the can-do and confident neoliberal representations of women in popular culture (Dobson and Kanai 2018). Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman have also described the anti-heroism of post-2008 female characters: unlikeable or self-sabotaging, these push back against aspirational discourses and conventional femininities (Hagelin and Silverman 2022).

We notice that affective dissonance is increasingly taking the shape of rage, and underpinns a trope of female friendship recurring across a range of recent shows in the US and UK: female intimacies forged through rage, violence and murder of intimate male partners. In the UK show *Girlfriends* (ITV 2018), Linda (Phyllis Logan) pushes her abusive husband off a ship and her friends rally around to protect her. In *Kevin Can Go*

*F Himself*, two female friends conspire to murder a controlling husband (AMC 2021-2022). In *Ginny and Georgia* (Netflix 2020-), the mother murders her new husband to protect her daughter from sexual violence (and has done so before). *Am I Being Unreasonable* (BBC 2022), named for Mumsnet's 'AIBU' posts, features a murderous mother protagonist and her friend, while *Bad Sisters* (AppleTV+ 2022) tracks sisters plotting to get rid of an abusive brother-in-law. As mothers, these women are further along in the heteronormative lifecycle than the generation analysed by Dobson and Kanai, and dissonance emerges from watching mothers act in ways that seemingly contradict cultural logics of social reproduction. Given how frequently rage – and the violence it begets – is characterising a generation of mothers and the intimacies they share, we extend what Linda Åhäll calls a methodology of feminist curiosity (Åhäll 2018), asking how this dissonance feels, what it does, and why that matters for feminist inquiry.

We focus on three post-2016 US shows: *Dead to Me* (Netflix 2019-2022), *Good Girls* (NBC 2018-2021) and *Big Little Lies* (HBO 2017-2019). These emerge from mainstream production houses and are commercially successful. All three represent mothers whose disappointment and bitterness about the violence they've experienced from men (whether physical, sexual, fiscal or emotional) is articulated as rage and this rage is key to the intimacy of the women's friendships. Rage shares the same object – intimate male partners – and is the catalyst to the removal of men from the home through murder or other forms of violence. We are curious about how the rage women share between them is being linked to the ejection of men from the heteropatriarchal

household, and to possibilities for disrupting the home as a site for the reproduction of heteropatriarchy. Our curiosity is heightened by the extent to which the shows' marketing and promotional apparatus leans into the promise of women's rage as feminist solidarity and consciousness. If the shows hold radical potential, however, we also find in our analysis that rage is simultaneously enabling forms of repair and recuperation of the heteropatriarchal household it seems to threaten; we contend this has to do with the racialisations of the household and its affective structures. While our analysis is focused on these three shows, we situate them in their wider context to understand how they emerge from the present conjuncture and recognise how they speak to it. Rage, we observe, is increasingly vital to contemporary discourse: by interrogating how these shows grapple with it we ask feminism to reckon with the kinds of promise suffusing rage and claims for its political potential.

**Rage in *Good Girls*, *Dead to Me* and *Big Little Lies***

*Dead to Me (DtM)* is an award-winning Netflix dark comedy created by Liz Feldman (also creator of *2 Broke Girls*). It begins with the inception of its central friendship between two white women, when Jen (Christina Applegate), a real estate agent whose husband has been recently killed in a hit-and-run near their home, goes to a grief support group and meets Judy (Linda Cardellini), who is mourning the loss of her fiancé Steve. They quickly become close through long, sustaining, night-time phone calls. Yet we soon find out that Steve is actually still alive, but an abusive crook who broke up with Judy after her fifth miscarriage. Jen and Judy's friendship survives this lie, but eventually Judy is revealed as the hit-and-run driver who killed Jen's husband, drawn to

Jen as a kind of penance. At the end of the first season Jen murders Steve. This is framed as a spontaneous act stemming from Jen's rage when Steve reveals he was in the car with Judy when it hit Jen's husband. They spend the second season working out what to do with Steve's body, and the third trying to evade being caught after the body is found.

*DtM* carries a distinct sensibility: much of the viewing in the initial episodes gains its pleasure from the affective dissonance between Jen's sarcasm and biting anger and Judy's touchy-feely vulnerability. Judy's initially upbeat and kooky sensitivity however is increasingly complicated by anger, and her stability is frequently a subject of speculation. Jen's affects similarly preoccupy the show – the rage that initially seems an outlet for grief becomes, by the second season, an affective register revealed to pre-date her husband's death. Both characters experience their feelings as sources of alienation from, and disdain to, their intimate others: Steve is cruel and dismissive of Judy's grief, while Jen's flashbacks imply that her husband used her negativity to justify his infidelity and callousness. Indeed Jen's tonality is played off against her blond Californian whiteness, producing an apparent affective dissonance between the American promise of a happy femininity and rage that is a hallmark of both Feldman and Applegate's work. This dissonance is at its most darkly comedic, perhaps, in Jen's preferred form of 'meditation': she listens to death metal in her car.

Friendship sustains them through the grief and financial and criminal anxieties induced by their male partners' deaths, yet Jen and Judy are responsible for those very deaths

through rage (Jen) and rage and grief (Judy). Equally notable is how the shows intimate that their spousicides, although accidental (Judy) and spontaneous (Jen), are deserved and even necessary or inevitable. Whilst domestic violence is left implicit, the male partners are portrayed as dismissive, neglectful, untrustworthy (both in relation to fiscal and intimate fidelity), mean, and emotionally (if not physically) absent from their domestic lives. Just before Jen kills Steve, his taunts evidence, for Jen, that Judy has been victimised by her fiancé's cruelty. Indeed in season three she tells the police that she killed Steve to protect Judy from being killed. Steve confirms his cruelty when he reveals that he was a passenger in the hit and run and coerced Judy into abandoning the body. In these ways female friendship doesn't simply coincide with, but arises from, killing their male partners. Their rage – and its consequences – sustains, rather than undoes, their intimacy and throughout the three seasons their friendship is framed as vital in a way their male partners weren't. Indeed the household Jen and Judy form frequently hints at an erotic quality to their intimacy.

*Big Little Lies* (*BLL*) is also set in California. Adapted from Lianne Moriarty's 2014 novel, the show centres around the relationship between four white mothers and a Black mother whose children are in their first year of school together in the affluent coastal community of Monterey: Madeline (Reese Witherspoon), Celeste (Nicole Kidman), Renata (Laura Dern), Jane (Shailene Woodley) and Bonnie (Zoë Kravitz), new wife to Madeline's ex-husband. As in *DtM*, violence is intimately linked to the emergence of female friendships. In the first episode we find out there has been a murder at the school, but are not told the victim or perpetrator. The program flashes back to follow the

relationships between the women from the first day of school, when Renata's daughter is choked and identifies newcomer Jane's son Ziggy as the perpetrator. Jane's refusal to believe Renata's daughter over Ziggy enrages Renata, and Celeste and Madeline take Jane under their wing. Male violence comes to dominate the development of this friendship, as Jane reveals that Ziggy is the result of a rape that, they realise at the end of the first season, was perpetrated by Celeste's husband Perry (Alexander Skarsgård). What the other characters don't know until that last scene as well is that Perry is physically and emotionally abusing Celeste, and that it is one of her sons who throttled Renata's daughter. In the season finale Perry attacks Celeste at the school fundraiser in front of Madeline and Renata. Jane recognises him as her rapist. Bonnie arrives at this moment and, as he stands over Celeste kicking her, pushes him: he falls down a set of stairs and is impaled on a piece of metal. The second season deals with the aftermath of Perry's death, and the police investigation into the women's claim that he lost his balance.

A few things are worth noticing about how intimate affects work here. As in *DtM,* female friendship in *BLL* emerges from women killing men; but here the violence men do is not left implicit. Perry is not the only abusive male in the show – every male partner at some point is figured as an actual, or potential, threat to their wives in some way. Renata's husband's is financial as we elaborate below. Madeline's own infidelity is revealed to be rooted in a suspicion of men that the show tracks back to her father's infidelity, discovered by her as a child and kept secret, at his wishes, from her mother. Nathan (James Tupper) - Madeline's ex and Bonnie's current husband - and Madeline's

husband Ed (Adam Scott) are portrayed more subtly, but as no less definite, expressions of toxic masculinity. This is highlighted in their pea-cocking with each other, but also in how Ed (a self-described “good guy” who’s always been “steady Eddie”, as he tells Madeline after finding out about her affair) looks at women in uncomfortable ways. For example, shortly after finding out his stepdaughter Abigail has gone for birth-control with Bonnie, Ed’s eyes linger on Abigail’s body as she leaves the room; the camera draws attention to the same discomforting gaze directed toward Bonnie and her clients at her yoga studio. Ed’s potential to be violent to Madeline is intimated during an argument when he forcefully tells her to “Shut up”; in the series finale, when Madeline finds him hitting a heavy-bag, she asks: “Is that me? That punching bag?”. Even male children in the show raise the spectre of violence: while Perry’s children with Celeste abuse Renata’s daughter, Ziggy fears that he will become violent because he was conceived through rape. Even when Jane reassures him, her facial expressions suggest an uncertainty about whether she believes it herself.

In these ways *BLL* raises the threat men pose to women across a range of legibilities, and the narrative plot gains its dynamism, in part, through the questions prompted by this range: which of these men abuse women? And is there any male who doesn’t, or won’t, eventually? By withholding till the end of season one who the rapist and murderer are, the show is able to do two things. First, it generates what we call an *epistemerotics* – a narrative arc whose forward drive derives from watching women coming into their knowledge about men’s violence. With our own knowledge of the characters’ secrets, we watch them figure out the male violence we know is all around them until it is, finally,

irrefutable and fatal. In doing so rage is charged with the climax of that epistemerotics, and its affect fused with knowledge. Second, it posits women's friendship as bonded by that fusion, rather than friendship per se: as Celeste says in the season two finale, "the friendship *is* the lie". This contact point between consciousness and action, knowledge and solidarity, forms a 'natural' bond, an instinctive intimacy and an intimate knowledge between women that cuts across their differences. In so doing the epistemerotics of rage charges female friendship with vitality in the form of vital knowledge, survival and even life itself. The violence women do to men when enraged by them is natural, necessary and just - a matter of life and death.

Tonally, *Good Girls* (*GG*) sits closer to *DtM*'s dark comedy than *BLL's* melancholic aesthetic and often eroticised lingering gaze; edgy with cynicism, its soundtrack supplies affective dissonance and irony while the camera gaze is deployed with a consciousness that overtly orients the show to the conjuncture from which it emerges (as we will discuss). These are not affluent Californian upper-middle class and wealthy women, nor are their homes aspirational. Set in Michigan, Beth (Christina Hendricks) and her sister Annie (Mae Whitman) and their childhood friend Ruby (Retta) hold up the budget grocery store where Annie works. In a series of flashbacks we learn that Annie is a white struggling single mother of a transgender son; white house-wife Beth's husband has been having an affair and they are about to lose their house as he took out several mortgages to float his failing car dealership and give expensive gifts to his lover; and the daughter of Ruby, who is Black, will die if she doesn't have a kidney transplant that is beyond the income of Ruby's table servicing and her husband's as a new cop.

The money they steal turns out to be from a laundering operation: as payback the gang-leader Rio (Manny Montana) makes them wash counterfeit. Over the course of the show, the women become counterfeiters themselves; by the end of the series Beth has become a dirty politician.

Unlike *DtM* and *BLL,* these female friendships do not emerge from male violence in so far as their intimacy predates them meeting their husbands (and ex-husband in Annie's case). Nor are husbands (or ex-husbands), ever revealed or even intimated to be physically violent towards them. Yet their friendship *is* entangled with male violence. Beth is sexually involved with Rio; Annie's boss attempts to rape her when she refuses to give him sex in exchange for his silence about her role in the robbery; and Ruby is intimidated in her home by her husband's superior (a detective investigating the women). Later in the series, Annie's apparently perfect boyfriend turns out to be an undercover agent. Note too that Beth and husband Dean met, as teenagers, when he and some friends make fun of her and trash the diner where she works. In these ways male characters knowingly exercise power over the women in ways that – like in *BLL* – threaten the women's vitality. This is, of course, best exemplified in Dean, who cheats on Beth, gets the family in huge debt and actively conceals this from her.

As with the other shows, the intimacy of these friendships is bound up in knowledge about these precarities and violence: friendship here is also sustaining and reparative. In all three, female friendship is expressed as a form of survival. The most significant distinction to notice about *GG*, however, is that the rage and violence with which these

women respond to the forces shaping their lives is neither accidental nor spontaneous. The violence they commit is calculated and protracted across four seasons. Yet it is portrayed as no less *necessary:* they are repeatedly coerced, trapped, and victimised. Every time they appear to have procured a way out, or a better life, something happens to put them back into precarity and desperation. And yet - in the final episodes we realise they also *enjoy* what they are doing. In this sense the link between vitality, women's friendship and violent rage is valanced not just as survival, but as *life-giving*, and pleasurable.

**The Legibility of Rage in the Current Conjuncture**

These shows lie at an intersection of specific socio-economic axes of politics, economics and history, what Stuart Hall terms the conjuncture (see Gilbert 2019). Situating the shows as a phenomena amidst social forces – discourses, institutions, epistemes – helps us think about how the shows are enabled and circumscribed by the present moment, but also what they reveal and conceal about unequal and contesting power relations. The conjuncture from which our shows emerge is dominated by deregulation and the sectors of finance and tech which have coalesced to reduce workers' rights and de-value values wages (Ho 2009). We are a observing a new political economy driven by the inflation of assets, particularly in relation to housing. As Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper and Martijn Konings argue, people "are increasingly living, managing and planning asset-driven lives ordered by the speculative logics of asset appreciation" (Adkins et al. 2020, 69). This asset economy deepens historical inequalities as households become less dependent on stagnant wages and more on the

intergenerational transmission of assets. This transmission is classed and racialised as oppressions are re-entrenched favouring families with historical wealth. Cathy Park Hong charts the increased divergence between white and Black median families' assets that leads Linda Martin Alcoff to describe the racialised disproportion of assets as making "the racial project of whiteness […] in effect, an oligarchy" (in Park Hong 2021, 84; see also Martin Alcoff 2015). Concomitant with these solidifying of oppressions, longer work hours and reduced government support for children, mothers and older people mean that there is a crisis in care and social reproduction (Briggs 2017; Chatzidakis et al. 2020). These issues, to differing extents, drive the plots of these shows.

That the mothers' turn to violence (whether as murderers or criminals) is provoked by male abuse, control and coercion speaks to the heavily mediated contemporary struggle over patriarchal domination at both a presidential/political and intimate level. Yet our shows also assume the audience's sympathy *for* these women, despite the extent to which retractions of women's rights in the present conjuncture might index a conservative retrenchment that would be offended by these shows' appeals to forms of gendered emancipatory rhetoric. Indeed, contradictions, contestations and struggles also mark this historical moment. Protests such as the Women's Marches expressed rage at Trump's ascendancy. There is a heightened visibility and conversation around sexual violence and its intersections with race by movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp. In addition, an increasing visibility, societal understanding and resistance to police violence against Black people has partly emerged through the growth and

significance of the Black Lives Matter movement. Key to these movements and the political consciousness they mark is rage about the institutional and systemic violences that underpin and sustain the persistence of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.

Our shows indicate that post-2016 TV is assuming a key position where these issues are represented and, through the different characters' reactions and responses, talked about and fought over through the affective and psychic charge of rage. Indeed, these shows demarcate a more generalised departure from conventional postfeminist narratives through their depiction and celebration of angry women as feminist solidarity. Feminist scholarship has noted that popular feminism (Banet Weiser 2018) has gained attention and traction in branded spaces, and also that women's anger is "increasingly legible within popular and commercial cultural forms" (Boyce Kay 2019, 591). The linkage between feminism and women's anger is widespread and the extent that this is saturating the media landscape tells us it is commercially viable.

Our shows talk to this through their marketing and promotional apparatus, which is centred around this linkage between rage and feminist promise. In addition to their critical acclaim (including a Women's Film Critics Circle award for *Good Girls*), all three of our shows have been awarded the Reframe Stamp for Gender-Balanced Production – a certification awarded to media (and corporations) that show progress toward gender equality and greater representation of women in key roles. Indeed critics' responses to the shows often interprets their rage and violence as subversive, and the female friendships as feminist solidarity. As many reviewers have noted, the shows are tapping

into markets for female friendship and the choice of actors is part of this marketability - in casting actors that, generationally, target-audiences will have grown up with or watched over several years, the shows are able to exploit a feeling of intimacy and history between audience and actors, creating the sense that these actors are speaking for a generation – they are in these roles as a kind of solidarity with and for the representation of stories by, about and for not just women, but women whose shared generationality forms part of their audience relationship.

Marketed as feminist parasocial 'friends' to the generation of women they address, the shows' intimate publics (Berlant 2008) are partially constructed by the stars (or the children of stars, in the case of Zoë Kravitz). Witherspoon's career is indicative of how this generational stickiness is working in the promotional culture of sisterhood: in 2002, her *Sweet Home Alabama* character retreated from her highly visible fashion job in New York to reunite with her childhood sweetheart, a romantic plot that is typical of postfeminist narrative arcs (Negra 2009). Fifteen years later, in *Big Little Lies* Witherspoon plays a cheating wife complicit in the cover up of murder in a television show that Witherspoon herself co-produced. While post-recession media representing young people reveals the break-down of the postfeminist sexual contract, those media focalise this breakdown around women who are generationally still 'girls'. The women in our shows are further along the conventional 'postfeminist lifecycle' (Negra 2009) which articulates successful femininity to motherhood; the implication is that these mothers once bought into the cruel optimism of heterosexual fulfilment (Berlant 2011) that was so key to the rom coms of the 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, Witherspoon's career is

so illustrative because she, as an actor, *was* the woman buying into that contract. But she – and the generation of women she intimates – is now raging against it.

The terrain of popular culture has to grapple with (re)emerging and dissonant discourses that have been pushed to the surface as the compromises of the postfeminist contract are violently exposed (McRobbie 2009), and the conjunctural analysis we have offered so far situates our shows as indicative of how a taste for rage is being bound up with that exposure. That is not to say that rage has never before been a significant feeling in political and/or popular culture. Rather, as we elaborate later, the rage that we are observing in these shows is historically cyclical. But we want to highlight how the version of rage we are seeing in these shows, and its linkage with women's intimacy, is being explicitly articulated to feminist consciousness. While women's rage in popular culture has usefully been read as a 'safety valve' (Gill and Orgad 2019) through which the political is rerouted as 'complaint' into the realm of the sentimental and private (Berlant 2008), the shows we are looking at do not fully cohere to these descriptions. Key to the displacement of rage Lauren Berlant outlined was the question of the relation between political critique and genre: they identified that in popular culture being marketed to women, rage appeared "mainly in episodes that don't matter narratively" (Berlant 2008, 11), converting critique into complaint. Yet in our post-2016 shows rage is far from episodic and key to the narrative arcs across multiple seasons. This centring of rage reveals a historical shift in sensibility.

This shift can be illustrated by comparing rage to other affects of maternal disaffection circulating in the subversion of tropes of maternal goodness in films such as *Bad Moms* (2016), *A Bad Moms Christmas* (2017). Jo Littler contends that “the mother behaving badly is simultaneously indicative of a widening and liberating range of maternal subject positions and symptomatic of a profound contemporary crisis in social reproduction” (Littler 2019, 1). Certainly, rage shares contingency with the ‘bad mom’ in that both are tied up in questions about maternal responsibility and specifically the appropriate response of the responsible mother to situations, scenes or conditions that are injurious (both in terms of injury experienced and injury committed) to mothers, to mothering and to the households mothers keep. We can see the relationship between hedonism and rage as, in part, a question of spectrum: at what point does a 'bad mom' become criminal? And at what point do the circumstances of postfeminist mothering, marriage and domestic life become injurious enough to warrant a criminal response? But we demarcate these as different genres with distinctive sensibilities because their primary affects of hedonism and rage are making different claims to knowledge and action.

We notice that in the ‘bad mom’ genre maternal resentment and disaffection are ultimately located not in mothering per se, but in the obstacles women encounter to being a good mom, predominantly themselves and their own expectations about what being a ‘good’ mom is, often portrayed through the policing of mothering by the PTA (for example, Christina Applegate as the PTA president in *Bad Moms*), or by the moms’ own second-wave mothers (Susan Sarandon, Cheryl Hines and Christine Baranski as the grandmothers in *A Bad Moms Christmas*). Where husbands let their wives down

(through irresponsibility, lack of parental involvement, and infidelity) they are treated like additional children, and their failures ultimately routed back to a logics of maternal care and responsibility. Bad moms either make-over the husbands they have (an education usually achieved by leaving them alone with parental responsibilities so that they have to 'grow up'), or, if those husbands aren't responsive to lessons in responsibility, the mom gets a new one who is. Maternal disaffections diagnose the need to mother better, and that includes teaching men how to (re)invest in the household. Social reproduction expands here to teaching a generation of men how to continue reproducing the heteropatriarchal household.

But while our moms are also invested in motherhood and the household, their rage discovers *men* as obstacles to mothering and social reproduction and, significantly, identifies that obstruction as irreparable. Littler argues that in the 'bad mom', the crisis in social reproduction becomes domesticated and gendered as a problem to do with individual men, rather than a wider political and socioeconomic issue that needs extensive collective action and public mobilisation. Individualisation marks the household as an index of broader struggles. Yet we note the gendered structure of that household remains intact. The men in our shows however are portrayed as unteachable and unchangeable, the injury they produce so persistent and sustained that it can be framed as *wilful*: these are not men who don't know better, or who haven't yet been taught better; they were taught, they do know and yet they continue to act in ways that are injurious to the women they're intimate with. Notably, our shows don't offer their moms repair through divorce and remarriage – the obstacle men pose to the

maintenance of the household is widespread and systemic. The epistemerotics of rage articulates the knowledge that #YesAllMen, and speculates about what happens when men seemingly can no longer be reproduced through practices of mothering or gendered modalities of care into heads of household for which women can keep house.

Rage does lend radical potential to our shows – it no longer centres the crisis of social reproduction around women's failures to properly perform or adapt themselves to the femininities and concomitant sexual divisions of labour underpinning the post-feminist contract. What is centred is the relationship between masculinity and the precarity of the house that contains and gives shape to the heteropatriarchal household. In the bad mom genre, even if the household requires repair, the home as house itself is never at stake, and while it provides the scene for family life its presence is as a cosy maternal space that women, through the pressures on them to be good moms, don't get to enjoy - hence being 'bad' at mothering resolves the problem by freeing up affective space and time to enjoy the home they make. But in our shows the house, even amongst the wealthiest characters, is at risk of being taken away, widening the crisis in social reproduction from disaffection about their domestic scenes to the threat of its loss. The historical shift in sensibility we see in rage, then, is tied up in the economic shifts in the conjuncture, which we earlier defined as the asset economy.

**Keeping House in an Asset Economy**

That husbands can no longer be relied upon to finance the home and endorse the division of labour structuring the gendered household is a problem for these mothers.

But that men also gamble with home ownership is devastating: in an asset economy where wages are no longer relied upon for class mobility, it is the home that becomes the primary marker of class. All the heterosexual couples in these programmes own their houses, whether this is inherited (Ruby and Stan), multiply mortgaged (Beth and Dan) or leveraged as upper-class display and income in *BLL* and *DtM*. The house must be protected by the women at all costs. In our shows it is when the property is threatened, such as when *GG*'s Dan re-mortgages it or *BLL*'s Gordon commits fraud that the mothers' rage is unleashed. Indeed, the volatility of these men is a significantly pointed trope in these shows considering how, as Adkins et al point out, "assets are not static forms of property with stable and predictable values but are exposed to often volatile market valuations" (Adkins et al. 2020, 69). Given this, we suggest the men's wilful unpredictability portrays and plays out the changing political economy in the so-called private space of the home. The asset economy is transforming household structures, suffusing its gendered roles with precarity. Because of the capriciousness of these men, the mothers strive to find other ways to preserve the household as an asset as well as a site of social reproduction (including income streams). They must 'keep the house' as well as 'keep house' and this becomes the primary work of motherhood.

Renata's rage in *BLL* is a potent example. A Chanel and Stella McCartney-wearing self-made millionaire, she has an unteachable man-boy for a husband (complete with electric train and man cave) whose securities fraud renders the household bankrupt. Like Beth's husband (*GG*), he financially threatens his family. And like Beth's husband he is a cheater. But where Beth channels her rage into maintaining a 1950s housewife

exterior and strategizing crime, Renata releases her rage in a series of explosive scenes that are infused with dark humour. Finding out about Gordon's affair, she yells: "You have lost all our money. You have plunged us into bankruptcy. We are selling our home. Our daughter's home. And all the while you've been fucking the nanny." Characterised as having escaped a troubled childhood through money, she rages at having it taken away from her, no less by the person with whom she signed the marriage contract – that is, the heterosexual patriarchal bargain. She is especially angry at not being able to pass on assets to her eight-year old daughter. Following the bankruptcy, she throws a 1970s disco-themed children's birthday party (even though it's not her daughter's birthday), replete with magician, princesses and superheroes, in order to display the integrity of her assets – including social status and whiteness – for her daughter's future.

The home appears not only a precarious asset, but as a site of terrifying debt. This is potently portrayed in *GG* where 'keeping house' explicitly includes the scrutiny of balance sheets and the management of liquidity – including income streams. *GG* makes the financial and speculative affects of servicing the assets' debts powerfully visible in the way it dramatizes the volatility of this asset economy by foregrounding debt not just in service to the mortgage, but to a violent criminal gang. Finance-centred home-making as balance sheet and risk management is played out by their entanglement with the dark underworld of money laundering, money washing and murder. Behind the façade of the (humorously portrayed) traditional housewife's scrap-booking and baking are Beth's criminal activities which include 'washing' counterfeit in the tumble drier. The

luminous whiteness of Beth's femininity is fetishized but also ironized, as the show (joyfully) troubles what is being reproduced in the contemporary asset-driven household.

Thinking 'keeping house' and 'keeping the house' together enables us to ask about what kinds of femininities are being depicted or struggled over in these television programmes. If the asset economy is being acted out by unpredictable and volatile men, then what is happening to the women: (how) is femininity being re-scripted? We suggest that these mothers are performing 'speculative femininities' in the precarious territory of the home. The asset economy is predicated on speculation – the act of trading a financial instrument involving high risk in expectation of significant return. These women are speculating about divesting from husbands in a gamble for assets with a higher yield or predictability. The patriarchal head has become too risky, too low on return, especially in relation to the essential assets supporting the family. Thus it's not just a historical shift in sensibility being revealed, but a shift from one economy to the current, a shift that is intensifying what motherhood does and means, and the kinds of speculative practices entangled in femininity. More than this, however – and this is what we discuss in detail below – divestment from one asset involves re-investment in another. Speculative femininities here are also asking whether female friendship can be the source of re-investment – can it offer resilience against the increasing precarities of the asset economy? And if so, how?

Whiteness is key to these speculations. Because the household is one of the sites – or the primary site – where the nation and its racialised oppressions are reproduced, this encourages us to ask what white American femininity is doing in these precarious and violent homes. As Imani Perry (2018) reminds us, the imaginary of the colonial household has a long and pervasive history in the US. The racialised, gendered and classed structures of homestead – headed by the white man with the white wife, children, servants and slaves differently straited beneath him - continue to inform intersecting axes of oppression in the present. And the white middle class family exerts a powerful imaginary as the ideal formation for racialised nation building (Hill Collins 1989; see also Grewal et al. 2020). But what happens when this white middle class home is portrayed as site of violence and volatility, and where the white patriarch is murdered, divorced or humiliated in order to keep the household and its family going? What does this do to the meaning and significance of white femininity, and its articulation to the nation? This question is partly what underlies the narrative thrust of these shows. For example, in *GG*, the luminosity of Beth's white body is charged with desire for Rio, a man who is consistently framed as Other, and this threat to white supremacy is key to the show's appropriation and exploitation of titillation (attested by the amount of YouTube clips of Beth and Rio, presumably as erotic material for audiences).

Raka Shome and others have argued that white femininity "centrally informs the nation". The nation reproduces itself through the "white heterosexual, upper-/middle-class women whose body is deployed to strategically secure, as well as produce, dominant

national desires" (Shome 2014, 23). We can see this being played out in all the shows as the majority of main characters are white and the racialised hierarchies of the friendship groups are problematically displayed. If we build on George Lipsitz's assertion that whiteness is inheritable property (Lipsitz 2015), then we can understand it as another asset in the household portfolio that can be transmittable to future generations in a white supremacist nation. This is certainly true for *BLL* where the fetishized and wealthy white femininities are spectacularly mobilised in the display of the asset economy. But, as Radhika Mohanram argues, women *become* white "through their relationships with white men" (Mohanram 2007, xxiii). So we need to ask: once the white head of the household has been murdered or humiliated, will the women continue reproducing the nation and its racialised systems of oppression? How? And what role will female friendship play?

**Rethinking the Promise of Rage**

Given the speculations rage engenders, we can press the promise of rage further. We have shown how the epistemerotics of rage lends these shows dynamism through the energetics of promise, where the thrill, for example, of the spectacle of Renata smashing her husband's train-set derives from the audience witnessing, and even synergetically and generationally *in*, moments of threshold knowledge in which the ideological violence of heteropatriarchy are being made *undoably* public. In other words, the dysfunction of the heteropatriarchal household is rendered known, undeniable and no longer tenable: surely we can't – and won't – go back? Through its fusion of generational friendship, knowledge and speculative action, rage is being articulated to

feminist consciousness. While this opens the shows out to radical possibilities, we have also shown that the racialised economics of the household complicates that promise.

The epistemerotics of rage gains its power from resemblance to what Sara Ahmed conceptualises as feminist *snap* – breaking points in our relation to the conditions *in* which and *to* which we've been bonded (Ahmed 2017, 198). Consider the final episode of season one of *GG*: in the backyard of Beth's house the three friends are in a trapped and desperate situation (one of many throughout the seasons) discussing whether to go to the police. Beth goes quiet, watches the daughters playing fairy princesses, then turns her head back to them and says:

> All those fairytales they told us when we were little girls. The morals were always if you're good, if you follow the rules, if you don't lie and if you don't cheat if you're good you'll get good things and if you're a dick you'll get punished. But what if the people who made up those stories are the dicks? What if the bad people made all of that up so the good people never get anything good? (season 1, episode 9).

The initial optics here depict Beth as having lost it; she's snapped. But through an intensely visualised sequence of eye contact in silence, the moment is staged as epistemerotic: they bond through the realisation of shared knowledge. They're not trapped and desperate because something went wrong, but because the situation they are in is produced by the mythology of goodness and optimism that secures their compliance and prevents them from living well. Beth's speech and their reaction enunciates their realisation of how cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) and the promise of

happiness (Ahmed 2010) are structuring the scene they find themselves in. As the penultimate episode of the first season, the scene functions episodically to signal this knowledge as a catalyst both for action and for the possibility of agency. The camera's shift, just before the credits, to an aerial view of the mothers and children intimates the expansion of this knowledge and its potential to disrupt the cyclical violence wrought on generations of 'good girls'. In this way, the women's breaking point is suffused with the possibility of being their turning point. Lest the visuality of the camera angle imply uplift, the violence within and rupture to their households in the season finale prevents their snap from being recuperated by positive affect into postfemininst sensibility.

Rage marks the limit point of how much women need to experience in order to know that they know what they know about men. And this knowledge is indexed as a culmination of generationally felt experiences. This is why scenes of rage involve an eruption that doesn't take place as new knowledge, but as knowledge that women realise they *already know*. In *DtM,* for example, the catalyst for Steve's murder is Jen realising that not only did she know – before he admitted it – what he did to Judy, but that now he wants to undermine her knowledge by commanding her "don't turn this into some sort of blaming men thing". Given the backstories of the women in *BLL,* their coming to knowledge of the violence of the heteropatriarchal home is also represented as the enunciation of generational knowledge.

This is why the idea of rage as female complaint or safety valve discussed earlier won't satisfy our understanding of its affects in the shows. Our shows' epistemerotics function

too centrally to be read as displaced, diverted, or following diversionary trajectories of depoliticization in the ways Berlant attributed to the popular culture of the early 2000s. But also because their epistemerotics of rage is cohering men into a single political object, indeed makes them visible *as* a single political object, and reveals that that object has a history of violence. In so doing, rage disrupts a key mode for the social reproduction of heteropatriarchy: the production, in women, of a willingness to see 'their' men as individuals with the capacity for an exceptionality from heterosexual culture. Rage is locating male violence as the ordinary and unexceptional partner of love in the affective arrangements of the heteropatriarchal household. We *do* have politicisation here, then: of attachments to men, and a binding of men into a political body from which women should unstick, or snap. In the formation of female intimacies, rage produces female friendship as its own political, and politicised body; it is developed as a mode of attachment in place of attachment to men. And it is articulating that to feminist consciousness.

Rage as we have been tracking it here is important for contemporary feminist theory, critique and practice, because feminism locates and interrogates affective dissonances between how the world purports to be, and how we feel it to be (Ahall 2018, 44). This imbues dissonance with greater feminist promise than those positive feelings we might describe as consonant with the ideological apparatus feminism asks about and links this dissonance to the emergence of a feminist subjectivity. But we might want to worry about that articulation of dissonance to consciousness, because that risks posing dissonance as a natural precursor to transformation of our political world.

**Naturalness and Racialised Repair**

Naturalness is particularly important in *BLL*, and key to thinking about the troubling politics of rage and the racialised affects of its speculative femininities. Heterosexuality and heterosexual culture are a key mode for the social reproduction of patriarchy. However as Jane Ward (2020) points out patriarchy requires the naturalisation of heterosexual intimacy through a promotional culture (marriage manuals, body improvement, dating boot camps, rom coms etc) that invests women in the ongoing project of heterosexual coupling. While in our programmes men are troubled out of their status as the natural object for women's intimacy this happens through an i*ntensification* of, rather than divestment from, natural bonds. Notice, for example, how in *BLL* when Perry is killed we have a third presence: the ocean. The epistemerotics when Jane recognises him features the same kind of silent eye contact as we noticed in *GG*: but here it is spliced together with footage of the ocean crashing on the rocky coast, and of the women playing together on the sand as the water rolls back out. The appearance, here, of the oceanic swell breaking violently yet giving way to a future present in which the women can look, together, to the ocean in a shared knowledge, works to secure or underwrite the eruption of feminist consciousness with nature as its guarantor.

This makes rage a sensibility whose dissonance can perform the promise of consciousness (curiosity, questioning, critical thinking) without actually providing it; rage is represented as a political sensibility that transcends feminist inquiry through its appeal to authentic and natural justice. This guarantee of justice underwrites its claims

to solidarity and collectivity. Rather than simply a *feeling* of transformation, here the bonds rage produces are suffused with the political energy of the promise of a politicised female intimacy. However, the way that intimacy is visualised here – the women watching their children play on the beach as they gaze together at the surf – engages an optics of the oceanic maternal. This pictures a futurity, following rage, in which the naturalness of women's intimacy with each other resolves the crisis men posed to mothering, and to domestic life.

Rage's repair work lies, here, partly in appearing to articulate critical orientation without actually doing so. But it lies equally in reconfiguring the social bonds of heteropatriarchy such that heterosexual intimacies may no longer be needed; at the very least, these are no longer naturalised as the intimate arrangement through which the heteropatriarchal household takes shape. Rage gives way to other vitalising intimacies. Yet because rage is being sourced by a conceptualisation of dissonance as a sign of natural justice, its vitality is neither equally distributed, nor does it produce the same effects. In *BLL* the action begot by rage's consciousness is outsourced to Bonnie, the only character in the group who is not white. While the other women gaze at the ocean in the future pictured as following Perry's murder, all but Bonnie are represented with embodiments of serenity and contemplation; while Bonnie looks at the sea she holds her hand to her throat, registering her vulnerability. She must not ever become an object of their rage, nor subject them to hers. Throughout the second season we see Bonnie drained of vitality, increasingly unwell; and while the other women continue to maintain the intimate secret, they never actually show care for her. Viewers of the show should be asking why

is it Bonnie who is called on by the show to intervene, act, and protect white women? Yet the semiotics of the natural circumvent this kind of questioning in place of the thrill of vitality. By making Bonnie the actant of rage, the show reproduces the racialised structures of affect at work in the colonial household, that is, the biopolitics of feeling through which Black people are simultaneously produced as instinctual and primal and as an affective resource in the service of the white household (Schuller 2017). But it also engages the audience in naturalising this arrangement even in the moment marketed to them as feminist consciousness.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of season two is that Bonnie *never* expresses rage against the white women with whom she is supposed to be bonded. Throughout the second season Bonnie not only preserves others, but she does so at the cost of her own vitality. Here the beach as a site of maternal iconography takes on further troubling semantics as a scene that the other women pressure and force her into coming to, despite her felt sense of dissonance with the scene of female intimacy taking place there. Dissonance turns out *not* to naturally resource justice; it is unequally distributed, and unequally available. In the final scene, when Bonnie is joined by the other women at the police station to turn herself in, the show demonstrates its wilful ignorance (Mills 2007) of how she is differently articulated to the state's regulation of justice. As Bautista (2022) and Ju Oak Kim (2021) point out, there is not simply a missed opportunity for the show to examine the complexities of how race functions in relation to femininity in *Big Little Lies*, but an *unwillingness.* This unwillingness is particularly troubling given the expansion of a media landscape that, as Imani Cheers observes, has seen an increase

in Black women as media owners, creative executives and actors, with concomitant changes in stereotypes of Black women on TV (Cheers 2018). Indeed this aspect of the show's representation of Bonnie is notably regressive, raising important questions about how Black women are being imagined in postfeminist media in light of the complexities Francesca Sobande identifies around the entanglement of Black feminism and postfeminist tropes in television (Sobande 2019). We posit this unwillingness as key to understanding the repair work that rage does in *BLL*: here the riskiness of their speculative femininities and its disruption of the American household is being offset by investment in and reproduction of whiteness.

The naturalness of rage works somewhat differently in *DtM*, where its speculative femininities include speculating, throughout the three seasons, about the possibility of queer intimacy. Indeed, in the final episode, with Judy dying from cancer they go for a last holiday in Mexico: "We're here and we're queer" laughs Jen as they lie together on sun loungers. Love songs provide the backdrop to the trip. In the morning Jen finds Judy and the rowboat gone, tracks leading into the ocean. Of the three shows we have been looking at here, the relationship between Judy and Jen is the most embodied – they sleep in the same bed on holiday – and visually open to queering the household, as we see Jen and Judy doing domestic tasks and living together in Jen's house. In this way, the show represents their intimacy as a possibility for how the household might be rearranged, but also for the possibility that their intimacy might be naturally more fulfilling. Judy's terminal diagnoses intensifies the expressions of love, friendship and grief between the two women, but her death also signifies its impossibility. Judy is

bisexual and in earlier seasons has a sexual relationship with a woman, but there are no visual cues that Jen and Judy have or had sex; their platonic friendship is assumed throughout in line with hetero-conservatism. In the final scene, Jen and Judy are still affectively enmeshed, even in Judy's death, but Jen is at home with her two sons, her new partner Ben (who is the identical twin brother of Steve) and their newborn daughter. The show depicts the recuperation of the heterosexual household, but it does so with great ambivalence. Ben tells Jen that this is the happiest he's ever been and Jen answers "I have something to tell you", before the credits roll. We know Jen's last words will be a confession that she let Ben go to jail for her crime. Although the show appears to end with a representation of the repaired household, it is suffused with grief, guilt, rage, betrayal and destructive secrets. At the heart of its white middle class household is a violent infrastructure, its irreparable dysfunctionality visually affirmed by Ben's image as the identical twin of the man Jen murdered.

Like *DtM*, *GG* also denaturalises the imaginary of the white American household, but it is capable of troubling it further because of its explicit pointedness about the asset economy it dramatizes as criminal. In the previous shows, naturalness is connected to the women's wealth, whether the Californian ocean or Mexican beaches, spaces that work as we have shown to semiotically express the natural justice of their rage. But the women in *GG* are working class and barriers to class mobility are narrative drivers. In *GG* the recurring natural trope is the local city park, which functions for the mothers as a front.  This show's epistemerotics offers a more layered understanding of regulatory power and how it is expressed at the level of their own households. How rage troubles

power is depicted as vitalising and irreverent: their rage not only eschews previous 'respectability politics' (Wood 2019, 611) but gleefully disrupts it. *GG* joyously deploys the vitality of rage to the point that the three women live for collective pleasures of criminal activity, making this show the most deliberately cynical and troubling of the American home. This includes how it speaks to the racialisation of that household.

Although Beth constantly positions herself as the head of the friendship group, Ruby is not a best friend side-kick who only makes a brief appearance. Ruby has her own narratives, her own (often joyously portrayed) family, and a loving relationship with her husband – the most positive portrait of heterosexual intimacy in all three shows. Stan is the most stable of the husbands, and he and Ruby have fun. Home is a site of care, reflecting bell hooks' insistence in *Yearning* on the importance of home as refuge and intimacy for Black families (hooks 1999). Notably, despite the conflicts created by the friends' criminality, Stan does show willingness to take on the risks of these speculative femininities. But Ruby's storyline culminates, at the end of the series, in being forced by both Stan and Beth to choose between her female friends and him (and their household). Because the show wasn't renewed we can't know what she decides. But that it ends on the suspension of Ruby's dilemma delineates the extent to which it recognises that the promise of female intimacy is entangled not just with heteronormativity but with race. We showed earlier how the shows depict the binding of men into a political body from which women should unstick, or snap, producing female friendship as an alternative mode of politicised attachment. However here where the Black household is differently articulated to nation and its reproduction of race, class

and gender, the project of Ruby's attachments cannot be captured by either Beth or Stan's ultimatum. Rage does not produce, for Ruby, a naturally just choice.

Bringing attention to the racialisations of rage portrayed in these shows through the characters of Ruby and Bonnie helps us to think through this historical shift in sensibility and its political promise. Through its fusion of generational friendship, knowledge and speculative action, rage *is* being articulated to feminist consciousness; but that consciousness is still grappling with its reproduction of whiteness where rage, like assets, is neither equally distributed nor equally just. While the epistemerotics of rage confirms women's knowledge that the heteropatriarchal household is irreparable, and promises a feminist snap that offers alternative bonds, how the shows respond to this promise is significant. All the shows speculate about what motherhood is and means in an asset economy, especially when the home both as intimate space and as transmissible property is so precarious. And all three still centre the importance of bonds, albeit detached from violent and inconstant men and speculatively re-attached to female friends, performing subjectivities we have called 'speculative femininities'. But while this produces a radical loosening of heteropatriarchal structures in these shows, each household signifies differently. *BLL* resolves the dissonance of rage through retrenchment, offsetting the riskiness of female friendship through renewed investment in whiteness. In *DtM*, the feminist snap of rage releases a coupling of female intimacy with vitality whose promise, though unfulfilled, irreparably disturbs both the white middle class heteropatriarchal household and its representation in the American imaginary. *GG* goes furthest in what it is able to do with that knowledge: it exposes and satirises the

work of the household in the current conjuncture and is able to frame these forces through intersections of gender, race and class. If the show seems unable to resolve the mothers' continual predicaments, which are repeated across four seasons, its speculative femininities reveals this as the nature of the asset economy: there isn't going to be a way of being in the present that resolves its crises. Ultimately, this is what makes these shows matter for feminist inquiry: they tell us, each in their own way, that rage cannot be disarticulated from the conjunctural forces from which it emerges.

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