



White anger, Black anger: The politics of female rage in *Little Fires Everywhere* (HULU, 2020)

RABIA BLANCA, RABIA NEGRA: LAS POLÍTICAS DE LA RABIA FEMENINA EN *LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE* (HULU, 2020)

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Abstract

This article examines the TV show *Little Fires Everywhere* through the operationalisation of the concept of “anger competence” (Chemaly, 2018). The interest in the series lies in its representation of female rage. We contend that its narrative approach both legitimizes its expression and unravels the structures and

practices of subjectification through the axis of class and race. To prove it, we tackle the construction of the enraged subject, what the mediatization unfolds and its effects.

Keywords

Female rage, Popular culture, Little Fires Everywhere, race, intersectionality

Resumen

Este artículo propone el análisis de la serie de televisión *Little Fires Everywhere* a partir de la operacionalización del concepto de “competencia de la rabia” (Chemaly, 2018). Nuestro interés en la serie radica en su representación de la ira femenina. Sostenemos que su abordaje narrativo legitima su expresión y desvela las prácticas y estructuras de su (b)jetiva ción a través de los ejes de clase y raza. Para demostrarlo, abordamos la construcción del sujeto enfurecido, lo que la mediatización de la rabia revela y los efectos de esta.

Palabras clave

Rabia femenina, cultura popular, Little Fires Everywhere, raza, interseccionalidad

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1. Introduction

With the expansion of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020), and the renewed force of racial justice movements, such as

#BlackLivesMatter in the USA and around the world (Tillery, 2019), we are seeing an increase in TV shows with women in leading roles, and notably of African American protagonists. If this is already (or by itself) a welcomed change, the fact that some of these shows focus on women's rage inspires awe. Since, let us remember, as Julia Lesage noted in the 1980s, "women's anger is pervasive, as pervasive as our oppression, but it frequently lurks underground" (1988: 421).

For, as Gill (2007, 2017) indicates, the dominant neoliberal framework promotes the ruling of feelings such as resilience, confidence, and a positive mental attitude; all needed to survive and thrive in the current moment in which social inequalities and social classes seem to have been erased, advancing the idea of autonomous and independent subjects able to build their own life-paths through rational life choices and decisions (Rottenberg, 2014; Bracke, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Kanai, 2018; McRobbie, 2020). According to this narrow script, other responses, other feelings traditionally considered negative are deemed inadequate and counterproductive. And, yet, we are now witnessing an increase in expressions of feelings and emotions such as pain, anger, indignation, and fury from different collectives in the face of social injustice and precarity. However, the increasing visibility of the enraged subject achieves a different degree of legitimacy depending on a gendered, classed and racial interpretation.

The presence of some of these shows that explore female anger in both their expressions of cause and effect makes it worthy of analysis. We are particularly interested in enquiring how women's rage and indignation can become a discourse that can reach beyond the accepted neoliberal frameworks of female empowerment or stigmatization to give rise to a feminist collective response.

On this occasion we turn to the drama miniseries *Little Fires Everywhere* (Hulu, 2020), based on a homonym novel by Celeste Ng, because, we contend, it understands the different structures behind women's rage. While it portrays the motives behind women's anger, it starkly differentiates it based on their race. This article proposes the examination of this TV show through the application of an analytical model developed under the R+D Project 'Mediatization of Women's Rage: Intelligibility Frameworks and Strategies of Politicizing Transformation' (PID2020-113054GB-I00; Spanish Ministry of Science & Innovation). This model is based on the operationalisation of the concept of "anger competence" (Chemaly, 2018) through 3 dimensions of analysis:

1. The construction of the raging subject: how the subject that expresses rage is characterized, paying attention to the physical, psychic and moral aspects.
2. The causes of anger: the individual and structural dimensions the narrative refers to as motives for the expression of rage.

3. The effects of anger: consequences of the rage in the material and symbolic arena in terms of social justice and the fight against inequalities.

But, in order to understand the theoretical basis that informs our research, first, we provide an overview of prior approaches to the study of expressions of anger, paying special attention to “affective injustices” (Srinivasan, 2018). We are particularly interested in its study from a feminist media perspective. We will then describe in depth the aforementioned three dimensions that for us reflect a genuine “anger competence”. Lastly, we will apply this model to the analysis of the TV show *Little Fires Everywhere*.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Why focus on emotions

The interest in affects and emotions that informs our endeavour pays close attention to the “affective turn” that permeates the Critical Theory approach to the humanities and social sciences since the 1990s. It is rooted in a social context that faces challenges whose origin lie in open-ended warfare, trauma, torture, massacres, terrorism, etc. (Anwaruddin, 2016; Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). This turn amounts to an acceptance of both the limitations of the cognitive approaches to analyze the place of the subject within social processes, and the consequent displacement of the idea of an autonomous, sovereign subject whose actions are guided by reason (Hipfl, 2018). This is amplified via the work on emotions developed by Ahmed (2004, 2010a, 2010b), Rottenberg (2014, 2019), Gill (2007, 2017), Gill and Donaghue (2013), Banet-Weiser (2018), Traister (2018), Kay and Banet-Weiser (2019), Orgad and Gill (2019), which capitalizes on the neoliberal governmentality of our emotions; and on Black Women’s anger by Lorde (1981), Springer (2007) and Cooper (2018). And, it is ultimately inspired by Butler’s work on violence and vulnerability (1993, 2004a, 2004b, 2010a), as it invites us to suspend our judgment ahead of any narcissistic celebration given the cultural grammar that precedes the positioning of the subject, and the constitutive interdependence of the relations between subjects.

2.2. Women's rage: formulation, construction and politicization

In the expression of rage by collectives discriminated against by the gender order, Halberstam (1993) discussed the transformative potential for previously subjugated subjects of exercising violence as an expression of their anger. The author states that an expression of female rage acts as a challenge to the "hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity" (p. 193). For Halberstam, the representation of female violence linked to anger is not the reverse of male violence; rather, its expression transforms the passive, symbolic caring function of the female in popular culture, and challenges the hegemonic insistence that links the right to exercise power and violence with masculinity.

These reflections are a starting point for innovation if we wish to change the forms of representation. Like Halberstam, we ask ourselves whether women have anything to gain from new narratives that present women's relation to violence in a different way. The fantasy of female violence and/or fury questions the eternal association of femininity with passivity, and breaks down sexist stereotypes by asking what would happen if we were to react in a different way, if we were to change the habitual narrative plots and closures. What would happen if our own feelings and emotions arising from rage and indignation were to appear as legitimate mobilizing forces that are not stigmatized?

The challenge is to go beyond the double bind that manifestations of rage and anger are confronted with in the light of "affective injustice", according to which the victims of oppression must contain their anger if they want to be seen as credible in the public sphere (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Having to choose between "getting aptly angry and acting prudentially" constitutes itself "a form of unrecognised injustice, [...] an affective injustice" (Srinivasan 2018: 127). Unequal access to the use of rage in the public sphere is particularly detrimental for collectives stigmatized as violent, especially Black women (Springer, 2007; Cooper, 2018; Srinivasan 2018). Despite the hypervisibility of feminist rage in the context of the #MeToo movement, the "feeling rules" (Kanai, 2019; term taken from Hochschild, 2003 [1983])¹ continue to disadvantage marginalized groups. Much research (Kimmel, 2017; Ging, 2019) has shown that male anger (tied to male privilege) reaffirms the same notion of subject as a current, rational agent of modernity, while the anger expressed by oppressed collectives is seen as "illegal anger"; by denying them the position of sovereign subject, their anger is interpreted as a mark (stigma) of otherness.

1. Feeling rules stipulate that one must have the right feelings for the right context, and if these feelings diverge from the appropriate ones, they must be worked on to make them 'fit' (Kanai, 2019: 61).

Nonetheless, female rage has found an emergent space in the settings of protests and politics, and in other cultural forms and discourses that question the concepts of vulnerability and resilience (Gámez Fuentes, 2021; Gámez Fuentes & Maseda García, 2020). It seems that female anger (particularly linked to the feminist movements) has acquired a new visibility (Kay, 2019). The governability of the feeling rules is changing, and this change affects the communication processes in the public sphere (Adamson, 2016; Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020; Gill, 2017).

Feminist media theory has generated abundant scientific literature on the ways in which rage operates within contemporary culture and politics, and has analyzed how rage is gendered and mediated (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Litosseliti, Gill & Favaro, 2019; Orgad & Gill, 2019). The question arises as to the political potential of rage or, otherwise, the role of mediatization in the transformation of gendered power relations. Sharing mediatized rage in movements like #Niunamenos in Argentina in 2015, #MeToo in USA in 2017, #YoSiTeCreo in Spain in 2017, #NoNosCuidanNosViolan in México in 2019, and the responses to feminist performance “Un violador en tu camino” in Chile in 2019 shows the potential for transformation of the common spaces as pointers to what is canceled or silenced.

Rage and anger are unintelligible to the hegemonic configuration of women's subjectivity (Fischer, 2000; Kennedy & Freeh, 2002; Traister, 2018; White, 2013). Madness and irrationality are the accusations most commonly found as expressions of women's rage (Chemaly, 2018; Traister 2018; Kay, J. B., 2019; Orgad, S. y Gill, R., 2019). In some cases, the expression of rage has even strengthened the patriarchal structures. For example, women showing rage and emotions in justice courts has been used to deny Black women's statements in rape trials. Women have learnt to display a quiet and restrained femininity in trials of rape to be believed in court while men display their anger to express that they are being accused unfairly (Boyce & Banet-Weiser, 2019). So, undoubtedly, women have been socialized by teaching them to acknowledge rage and anger, theirs or others', argues Chemaly (2018), but also to ignore it or to fear it. As she shows, the rage that is experienced individually or collectively is also culturally mediated in media, political and social discourses based on a social order that disciplines and controls women's rage.

In popular culture's research, the role of emotions and its mediatization is approached from the Cultural Studies' perspective. Williams (1978) defined the concept of “structures of feeling” to refer to feelings shared by the citizenship that materialize in artistic and media narratives, and which cannot be understood merely from an individualist or psychologist perspective. But it is in Ahmed (2010) and Kanai (2015, 2019, following up on work on the emotions by Hochschild,

2003), where we first find solid arguments for examining how the expression of emotions like anger transgresses the “scripts of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010) or the neoliberal “feeling rules” (Kanai, 2019) used to socialize us. These emotions (anger, fury, indignation...) contradict the dictates of the framework of recognition that says that women faced by unfavorable situations need to behave with stoic resilience, or even humor and positivity (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Favaro and Gill, 2019). According to Kanai (2019), even the relations between women within the post-feminist regulatory framework are based on a mix of intimacy and judgment. This combination is sustained by a social structure that dictates, legitimizes and/or punishes, and teaches us to steer clear of the terrible consequences that might be inflicted for deviating from it (Ahmed, 2010).

From this theoretical perspective, we are not only interested in understanding how, and from which positions, women’s anger and indignation are named in order to characterize these processes, but also in describing new narrative modes to articulate this anger or, in the words of Chemaly (2018), to develop an “anger competence”.

3. Methodological approach

In order to explore how this “anger competence” is carried out narratively in *Little Fires Everywhere*, we have developed a set of dimensions that act as significant concepts to address how the mediatization of rage can generate “anger competence” (Chemaly, 2018). Chemaly’s concept—which illustrates the building of awareness about one’s own anger and making something productive out of it—has its roots in Lorde’s (1981) call to use rage to reveal the mechanisms of domination, disarticulate affective injustice, and produce social changes (not only in terms of policies and legislation, but also regarding new narratives and alliances). Using Chemaly’s concept and the three dimensions developed below as criteria, we analyze how certain narratives and representations can enable women and subordinated collectives, such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), disabled, queer, and trans people, to use rage as a resource to confront and transform inequalities without being stigmatized and/or coopted by neoliberal discourses. These criteria informed our selection of the TV series to be discussed, and the scenes from the eight episodes of *Little Fires Everywhere* to be analysed. The three dimensions used to operationalize the theoretical concept are explained below.

3.1. Dimension 1. Construction of the subject that expresses rage

Stemming from the theoretical concept of “affective injustice” (Srinivasan 2018; Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019), through this dimension, we analyze the construction of the subjects who formulate rage, in terms of their credibility and agency. We consider how the gendered (and racial, class...) characteristics of the subjects affect how the expression of rage is interpreted; either as an expression of agency or of subjection, as an expression of power or powerlessness.

For instance, White men’s rage is acceptable, but Black men’s is not (Guerrero, 2016; Cooper, 2018; Phipps, 2021). In Cooper’s (2018) words, speaking of the US, “democracy is as much a project of suppressing Black rage as it is of legitimating and elevating white rage.” Kay and Banet-Weiser (2019: 604) bring to the fore how, while “White masculine anger becomes institutionalised, empowered and weaponised”², female rage is condemned and demonized; visible at best. Likewise, White women’s emotions (including outrage), particularly middle-class’, are judged more benignly than those expressed by women of color (Traister 2018; Cooper, 2018; Zeisler, 2018; Orgad and Gill, 2019; Phipps, 2021). This affective injustice is blatant in our public discourses in the form of an “inappropriate and disproportionate sympathy” towards men—particularly powerful men—in what Kate Manne (2018) termed “himpathy” (“a pathological moral tendency to feel sorry exclusively for the alleged male perpetrator”). (See also Traister, 2018 and Kay & Banet-Waister, 2019).

On the other hand, within the framework of post-feminist sensibility, it has been noted the affective labor of media images (Gray, 2013) turning women’s rage back on themselves, as the female tropes rooted in complaining, low self-esteem and discontent fit the prevailing cultural narrative (Orgad & Gill, 2019). In addition, dismissing and undermining female rage is also justified by its supposed connection to a biological response (hormones, chemical imbalance in the brain, etc.) detached from cognitive processes. This characterization of the subjects (and their contexts of action) lies under the formulation of who is allowed to formulate the rage and under which circumstances, and which expression of rage is legitimized in the public space.

Hence, this dimension allows us the analysis of how rage fits with the definitions of femininity and masculinity, and how the representation and decoding of rage strengthens or breaks from the hegemonic representations of gender. We seek out experiences in which cracks appear in this affective injustice and, therefore, enable breaking the double bind or “second-order injustice”. This is referring to the suffering of the violence that prompts the rage,

2. White men are angry because they feel their privileges has been curtailed by the advances of minorities.

but also the discrediting of the anger expressed or, as Srinivasan explains, the possibility of “further violence and retrenchment” to which women are tied to as “victims of systematic injustice” when dealing with the expression of rage in public (Srinivasan, 2018: 131).³

So, how can affective injustice be dismantled/fissured? How can we escape the double bind to which women are tied to when dealing with the expression of rage in public?

3.2. Dimension 2. What the mediatization of rage unfolds

This dimension addresses the material basis of the rage expressed by women. We are interested in describing processes in which the expression of rage reveals the inequality and oppression through structures and practices. In this sense, rage is productive (Lorde, 1981) when it clarifies the processes of structural subjection. On the other hand, rage is unproductive and linked to the neoliberal rules when rage is depicted as the fruit of individual characteristics and psychological patterns. As we explained above, the cultural and psychic life of postfeminism (Gill, 2017; Cabanas & Illouz, 2018) emphasizes that working on managing one's emotions is the key to self-improvement.

We aim to identify the subversive representation of rage that eliminates the distant, unequal relationship between the person who expresses rage and the person who witnesses it. In this way, mediatized rage works towards what Ahmed (2004) classifies as the “relation of equivalence”, avoiding barren feelings that produce complaisance as opposed to co-participation with the raging subject. The opposite of this definition is the conception of rage as an individual emotion, a strategy of representation and argument that cancels the social dimension of rage as a transformative emotion. Its individualist dimension would eliminate the transformative capacity of the collective expression of rage as a global feminist denunciation. So, it is especially interesting to analyze the link of the origin of the rage to the context from which it arises. In other words, an individualist or psychological approach would relate its expression of rage to the characteristics of the subjects who formulate it, at risk of essentialization and/or pathologization. However, the structural approach addresses the contexts from which the rage emerges: processes of precariousness, inequality, violence... The

3. Srinivasan considers that the rallying cry “don't get angry, it only makes things worse!” is morally insensitive as it transforms a moral violation (that causes the anger) into just a practical problem to be solved. Hence, it suggests that the responsibility for fixing the problem lies solely with the victim rather than the perpetrator. And Srinivasan continues: “it risks obscuring the fact that this advice is good advice only because of unjust social arrangements.” This pragmatic advice “can itself be oppressive, an obfuscation of the fundamental injustice at work” (134).

mediatization of rage risks decontextualizing the meaning of the expression of women's rage by decoupling it from the contexts of violence and injustice that women suffer. When emotions circulate cut off from their stories of generation/production, they transform individuals into "objects of feeling," deprived of context and paths of action.

In this dimension, the analysis focuses on whether the structural origin of rage is visible, whether the story of how the emotions are produced and circulated is recovered, and whether the links to the "scripts of happiness" or "feelings rules" are evident.

3.3. Dimension 3. The effects of affects

This section deals with the productive dimension of rage. Here it is essential to evaluate the capacity of rage for politicizing discursive transformation, and analyze what it mobilizes and generates. The effects of the narrated affects can be analyzed on different levels.

First, we are interested in investigating the empowering, transformative and non-imagined-before results the expression of rage has in the characters, the community portrayed and/or in the development of the plot. Thus, following Butler, we look for narratives that attempt at "seeing the impossible" and narrativize rage in a radical and (so far) unrealistic manner, "in order to open up a possibility that others have already closed down with their knowing realism" (Butler interviewed in Gessen, 2020).

In that sense, we enquire into the effects in terms of social mobilization, creation of movements and online and offline flows: feelings linked to indignation and rage, and those linked to love, solidarity, empathy (Martínez, 2019); feelings behind a retweet or the organization of an act of protest are of interest. Hashtag virality, the proliferation of gatherings and demonstrations, and the noticeable capacity of these constitute significant elements to assess the communicative effects of rage. This could be materialized in narratives that portray how anger mobilizes support networks, or relations of intersectional sorority; or how it ends up sustaining a collective ethics of care, or causing political, social or cultural changes in the plot.

We are also interested in political and social effects in terms of legislative change, classification of crimes, definition of rights, deployment of resources, insertion of tropes and language into the political sphere... It is of special interest in this case, to evaluate whether the political and/or institutional responses collaborate to form a new definition of the social reality or merely strengthen the existing one through strategies as varied as coopting prominent figures in the

movements, the political deactivation of protest by enforcing the instruments of discipline and control, etc.

Exclusively in the analysis of cultural production, we can also analyze the effects that innovative narratives have in terms of making denounced phenomena visible, and in their possible transfer and adaptation to other territories, geographies and realities. We are interested here in detecting transfers from popular culture narratives or symbols to diverse geo-political contexts. A useful example would be how the red uniform worn by oppressed/raped women in *The Handmaid's Tale* has been used in protests to defend sexual and reproductive rights. When/if given, we address these as localized decodings that broaden how oppression is generated in different ways depending on the different intersections involved.

Having all that in mind we will proceed to characterize how the TV show chosen configures the raging subject, what the expression of rage brings to the surface and what effects (if any) has outside the popular narrative, and/or within the show by offering a possible illustration of the impossible.

4. Case study: *Little Fires Everywhere* (hulu, 2020)

Little Fires Everywhere tells the story of different mothers whose experiences prompt their anger, but it focuses on Elena Richardson (Reese Witherspoon) and Mia Warren (Kerry Washington). The story takes place in the late nineties (August 1997). Let us remember, for the sake of this analysis, that this time is marked by growing inequalities as a result of the neoliberal turn and post-Fordist deregulation. In this society, poverty is not a simple state of scarcity, but a stigmatizing difference (Castel, 1997). The breakdown of social cohesion is reflected in a growing individualism and social segmentation as a result of the erosion of the middle classes and the crisis of the Welfare State. Additionally, the decade of the 1990s seemed a time where women made significant advances: joining the workforce, delaying having children, pursuing higher education in higher numbers, and gaining overall independence. However, according to Yarrow (2018), a close look reveals how this promise of equality came accompanied by a vitriolic hostility towards women and the commercialization of their sexuality. Moreover, these advances, although discreet, were not extensive to other collectives. Black, migrant and queer politics developed not only theory but also activism related to the different axes of oppressions experienced.

This multifaceted reality is discernible in *Little Fires Everywhere*. Elena lives with her husband Bill (Joshua Jackson) and four children in affluent suburb Shakers Heights, Ohio, where Mia and her daughter, Pearl (Lexie Underwood),

move. Elena thinks of herself as someone liberal and open minded so she is happy to rent one of her properties to African American Mia. Soon her daughter befriends Elena's children—Izzy (Megan Stott), Lexie (Jade Pettyjohn), Trip (Jordan Elsass), and Moody (Gavin Lewis)—and is welcomed by the latter into their home and their lives. Elena also hires Mia to take care of her house in what she believes is a nice gesture. Elena becomes increasingly curious about Mia, especially as she resents the closeness that is growing between Mia and Izzy, one of her daughters, with whom she has a complicated relationship. She decides to investigate who this woman artist is, uncovering a secret that could have grave consequences for Mia. The uneasy relationship between the two women becomes an open battleground when Elena finds out Mia is helping a Chinese woman, Bebe (Huang Lu), fight for custody over her previously surrendered child. This child had been adopted by one of Elena's closest friends, another White upper-middle class woman. The teenagers become stakeholders in this clash between Elena and Mia.

Several of the characters, if not all, express anger. Their anger is elicited for different reasons, and it is expressed in varied ways. Although we have selected the two protagonists, Elena and Mia, for the sake of our argument, this could easily be traced in the rest of the characters.

So, how does the series construct the subjects that express rage, how are the root causes of their anger represented, and what is the ultimate outcome of their anger at both the intra and extradiegetic levels?

4.1. Construction of the subjects that express rage (Dimension 1)

Elena is the mouthpiece of neoliberal principles: her interventions are always related to the existence of rules, of the imperative of playing by them, of making the "right" choices. From the beginning, she declares: "There are rules, and they exist for a reason. If you follow the rules, you will succeed" (episode 1). In this neoliberal, meritocratic worldview (Littler, 2017), the anger felt by the privileged seem to come from a sense of being the only ones playing by the rules while others, the disadvantaged, get a "free pass". Elena appears to express her anger in three directions: first, towards institutions that support positive discrimination and quotas. Elena feels the essay topic for Yale University's entry application is unfair to her daughter: "they're going to punish you because you have good parents who made good choices on your behalf?" (Episode 2), and "You really worked your tail off for this. And no one handed it to you, and you didn't fill some quota to get it. You earned it" (episode 7).

Second, she resents people who do not play along: “You are with no sense of the rules or consequences”, “A good mother makes good choices” (episode 4), “we all make our choices, you made yours” (episode 5), etc. In this sense, she is angry at Mia, at her daughter Izzy and at Bebe for daring to go against the rules of social expectations imposed upon women. Elena’s anger seems to be triggered because they make ostensible the self-imposed repression she underwent to achieve the (neoliberal) American dream. This is expressed when Elena blames Izzy, an unwanted baby, for her career stagnation and later Mia confronts Elena with this reality: “You can’t stand it, can you? [...] That someone would choose a different life than yours. [...] What was it you gave up, Elena? A love? A career?” (Episode 8).

So, ultimately, Elena is angry at herself for her lack of self-determination, independence, and freedom. As Angela McRobbie (2009) observes, the patriarchal consumerist culture causes the internalization of female anger once the woman fails to find “the resources within herself to regain the self-esteem which is always and inevitably lost” (111). McRobbie parts from Judith Butler’s ideas about “heterosexual melancholia”: the failure to conform to the masquerade of heteronormativity may be afflicted by different pathologies. For McRobbie, in the case of postfeminist culture’s “gendered melancholia” one such pathology is internalized “illegible rage of self-beratement born from constantly wrestling with the heightened terms of self-regulation”, in Wood’s words (2019: 611), prescribing women to be perfect in all domains.

This self-regulation is inextricably linked to self-surveillance. In the pursuit of success, the female subject is in a state of constant self-criticism, “competitive” with herself (McRobbie, 2015: 15) and this “demands an exhausting emotional hypervigilance over the acceptance of frustrations and dissatisfactions as legitimate responses to personal hardship and social injustice” (Dobson & Kanai, 2019: 776). The neoliberal expectations upon women follow a script where womanhood is tied to resilience (Kanai, 2019), feeling empowered and in control to shape her own story but without contravening gendered expectations of being pleasing and always feminine (McRobbie, 2009; Chemaly, 2018; Kanai, 2019). However, as the show progresses, we see how Elena exchanged her dream of becoming a reputable journalist to settle for a part-time job at a local newspaper and a role as suburban domestic ‘supermom’.

In the series this dynamic brings about a deep frustration. Elena’s anger is shown in crescendo; at first, more indignant than angry, with clenching jaws, smirking and other passive aggressive acts. Later, shouting and swearing—for instance, when she tells Izzy that if she wants to be part of that family and live in that house she has to “put on the fucking Keds” (episode 7). Elena is shown angered because she feels cheated. She did what she was supposed to do: “I had a life to start, a plan. I mean, it’s most people’s plan, right? graduate college, get

a job, get married, have kids, and you're happy till death" (episode 6). But she has to hear that she is "a sad person living a sad life. You stuck to your plan" in her ex-boyfriend's words (episode 5).

The ultimate expression of Elena's owning her anger closes the series. When the police report to Elena that they found little fires everywhere—"someone intentionally burned down your house with you inside. If Izzy didn't do it, who then?"—to what she says in a whisper: "I did it" and, then again, louder (episode 8).

Meanwhile, starting with episode 1 Mia negotiates inequality and discrimination whether gingerly stepping around them or openly expressing her anger at them. She is very aware of the racism humming behind an exterior touting racial utopia in places like Shaker. For example, when a car approaches Mia's after Elena's report, she prepares for the worst and with a forced smile, and obviously resentful, she urgently warns Pearl to make her hands visible. According to the literature, that is a skill that an African American must learn pretty quickly in life. As Cooper (2018) puts it, if a black person is to survive, he or she has to work hard, become educated and stay out of trouble ("then the White man will respect blacks; see them as citizens." Audiobook, Chapter 7, min. 9:25). At some point, Mia tells Bebe a Jamaican saying passed onto her by her mother: "What you say could kill you" (episode 2). This epitomizes the aforementioned double bind in manifesting one's own anger. Mia's approach to her own expressions of anger is clearly pragmatic but ultimately oppressive – "an obfuscation of the fundamental injustice at work" (Srinivasan 2018: 134).

The matrilineal legacy of enacting self-imposed restraint is reproduced in her relationship with her own daughter. When Pearl and Moody are caught trespassing, Mia scolds her, because she fears that if Pearl does not abide by the rules, life will be harder or even dangerous since racialized people are more likely to experience police abuse and to be imprisoned (Davis, 1981; Cooper, 2018). By contrast, the authority tells Elena not to be hard on the kids; they are just being mischievous like they were when they were kids. Elena invalidates Mia's anger by saying it was not such a big deal: "there is no reason to be this upset". It is apparent that, for Mia, respectability, is a surviving strategy in a hostile environment. "Black children soon learn to go along to get along" (Cooper, chapter 7. min. 30:20). Mia has to remind Pearl that "The cops are not on our side... We don't get passes like them [the Richardsons, White people]" (episode 1).

Mia's anger, a Black woman's anger, is thus, first toward the structural racism and towards the status quo, the prescriptions, etc. but this is inextricably intertwined with White women, who have been, in most cases, precisely the preservers of all these. As Rebecca Traister explains "some American women have been offered advantages of white supremacy... a kind of proximal power"

(2018: 122). Therefore, Mia is also angry towards White women because, historically, their fight has been a White woman's fight; in the case of the 1990s they have focused on neoliberal principles of achievement, success and the conquest of places of power. Mia is angry at the well-intended White woman who, while discussing 1996 Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (although visibly uncomfortable), marches with Dr. King, empowers young women of color, perpetuates the hierarchy and does "charity work" (allowing African Americans to rent her house at a good price and with flexibility), hires a "house manager" of color, and supports the adoption of a Chinese baby; all the while, remaining unwilling to evaluate her problematic position in relation to these other non-White women. Mia resents them for pretending to be allies, but using non-white women—to bear their children (Mia and Bebe), do their housework (Mia), use their name when having an abortion (Lexie of Pearl)—and absorb their experiences (in *Little Fires Everywhere* exemplified by the essay written by Pearl on personal experiences of discrimination than Lexie steals and paves her way into Yale), etc. So, although, at first, they seem to have a moment of complicity around the fact that they share experiences as women (prompted by the scene on the *Vagina Monologues* which, in turn, echoes the historical fights of the Women's Movement), soon the frictions appear.

Mia's anger towards the entitled White woman is also apparent when she learns Lexie bought Pearl a dress: "You are letting some spoiled White girl turn you into her dress up doll...She doesn't own you. You don't belong to Lexie Richardson" (episode 3). The series keeps including instances that make Mia's anger increase. They exemplify Traister's argument when she observes that "[a]mong the trickiest and most central dynamics between angry women is the degree to which they have often been angry at one another, and often for very good reasons, chief among them, the racial, economic, and sexual inequities that have contributed to making solidarity between women so elusive, so difficult, and often so painful." (2018: 113). At some point, Mia tells Lexie: "I spent two months cooking your dinners, working in your house. You never so much as uttered a thank you. And now you want more [affective labor]. Pearl may love to give and give to you, but I do not. I am done ... when you're done, wash out your own mug. For once."

Mia, thus, also expresses her anger in crescendo, but conveys controlled, contained anger from the very beginning. She is not aggressive, nor does she like small chat, and she often smirks. Occasionally she raises her voice, and after episode 4 she slams the car in anger. Her rage before society seems to be mainly expressed through contained gestures and her art. We perceive resentment gleaming in her eyes when the police car stops her or through a locked-eyed, dead stare of indignation when Elena offers her the job of cleaner ("maid" in the

words of Mia). She also performs creative rage: she takes a picture of Elena and burns it; she builds a model of Shakers to then burn it down; she transcends raw anger, sublimates it. However, after the trespassing incident, when she is alone with her daughter, she unleashes her fear for what could have happened to Pearl in an enraged state that scares her own child.

So, as we have seen, the series portrays female subjects whose anger originates either from feeling “cheated” by the normative script or from being expelled from it. But it is the contrast between the White woman’s and the Black woman’s anger that allows us a decoding of the raging subject which breaks from the hegemonic representations of gender and allows us to understand the self-imposed emotional labor women undergo before affective injustices.

4.2. What the mediatization of rage unfolds (Dimension 2)

In *Little Fires Everywhere* we find both productive and unproductive expressions of anger. Elena’s anger is mostly unproductive, owing to the fact that it is presented as connected to individual drives and frustrations derived from the defective promise of women’s life-work balance and a very limiting construction of motherhood. This hinders the social dimension of rage as transformative. In contrast, Mia’s could be deemed productive inasmuch as it brings out into the open the inequality and oppression of structures and practices.

Elena is not only a victim of expectations, though. She is also a perpetrator: she expects her children to always follow the rules and reap the benefits and, when they do not conform within the script of liberal success and the meritocracy myth, Elena unleashes her anger against them. In the case of Izzy, however, her anger reveals something else. She blatantly blames her for curtailing her plan as a super achiever woman in all terrains: professional and familiar (“I never wanted you in the first place”, Elena shouts in episode 8). The pregnancy interrupts her plans and Elena shuffles the idea of having an abortion, but it is heavily invalidated by her mum: “You have money and resources and there’s no reason that you can’t have another baby”. Abortion is not a proper choice for White and wealthy women. When Elena gets mad, cries and smashes dishes because she cannot stand dealing with four children, she expresses anger at the lack of choices women really have. While viewers understand the White women’s frustration with the gender scripts and the fallacy of the possibility of “having it all”, the representation of their rage in the series remains somehow restricted compared to the Black women’s anger. Mia’s rage reveals how hard it is to fight inequality and precarity within the underlying racist structures of violence. This unequal society is firstly

represented through the contrast of diverse family situations: an affluent White family with a rich lawyer as breadwinner and a part-time journalist as mother of four; an artist single Black mother who endures precariousness and itinerancy as a way of life to escape the trauma suffered, which occurs due to her structural position as a working-class Black woman; a Chinese migrant woman who lives on the margins, with no legal paperwork to reside in the US and no steady work, which results in her inability to support her daughter whom she is eventually forced to abandon.

The racist structuration of American cities and the presence of the ghetto is remarked in *Little Fires Everywhere* since the beginning when Elena explains that her mum was part of the committee that fight for Black people's inclusion in the village. In fact, in the last episode, Mia listens to a cassette on the history of Shakers:

[...] pioneering a truly integrated community. A suburban utopia where all races can live in harmony. Nowhere is the town's racial consciousness more evident [on the screen a close up of a woman securing her purse as Mia walks by] 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 masks a façade, revealing a complicated history of racial and cultural tension. In the middle of the century, as Jewish and African-American homebuyers flocked to Shakers, for the utopia that was promised, many white residents fled.

This shift between the promise and the reality reflects what has been happening throughout the episodes. The cracks start showing from the beginning in a seemingly post-racial world: When Elena sees Mia's car in the first episode, she immediately alerts the authorities and, after a brief disclaimer explaining that she never does this sort of thing, she stresses that the suspicious driver is African-American.

Throughout the episodes we see clear examples of the veiled (and direct) discrimination African Americans (and Chinese) suffer. For instance, when Pearl wants to take math classes, the school counselor dismisses it (episode 2) and offers instead the forms for subsidized lunch boxes. When Mia finds out Elena has been inquiring into whether or not Mia had a criminal record, she feels compelled to explain "I've never been arrested. I'm not a criminal" and how she lied about her references (in her rental application) because "a lot of landlords, when they see a single black mom, they don't want to rent to me" (episode 2).

The episode 3 title, "Seventy cents", makes reference to the amount the Chinese woman, Bebe, is missing to buy baby food and the 70 cents Elena's daughter, Izzy, is missing for bus fare. In the first instance Bebe is sent away from the grocery store (ultimately forcing her to leave her daughter at a fire station

as her baby needs someone who can provide for her), and in the second the bus driver waives the fee for Izzy so she can ride, with no concern or expectation that she will pay it. Thus, the seventy cents are symbolic of how much and how little is the same amount can be depending on your race and socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, Elena complains that now the discrimination happens to people who worked hard and it favors “crack addict” mothers, thus, symptomatizing a perverse turn of the screw in the form of reverse racism discourse.

In contrast with Elena’s neoliberal mentality, Mia offers a critical reading of it. The following brief dialogue addresses the fact that the existence of African Americans as maids bears the mark of colonization and slavery, indicating how the current class and ethnic model in the USA was established in colonial times.

E: A good mother makes good choices [...] and she really doesn’t leave the baby alone in the cold.

M: You didn’t make good choices, you had good choices. Options that being rich and white and entitled gave you.

E: I would never make this about race.

M: You made this about race when you [...] begged me to be your maid.

[...]

E: I thought we were friends.

M: Why do women always want to be friends with their maid?

Here Mia is also making an incisive comment that refers to the awkward dynamic that takes place between employers and domestic workers: “Closeness, familiarity, and intimacy coexist with distancing, estrangement, and dehumanization” (Ally 2015: 51) as employers often switch from social and physical distance to closeness creating a disquieting dynamic.

Actually, let us remark that in the history of the Women’s Movement, one of the thorniest issues has been the fact that middle-class White women would seek emancipation at the expense of the (Black or Indigenous) domestic worker. As Traister observes: “Among the trickiest and most central dynamics between angry women is the degree to which they have often been angry at one another, and often for very good reasons, chief among them, the racial, economic, and sexual inequities that have contributed to making solidarity between women so elusive, so difficult, and often so painful” (2018: 113).

Mia also expresses anger and rage against her daughter’s infatuation with Elena’s family and what they stand for. Rage cannot be decoded here just as a result of her jealousy or insecurity provoked by Pearl’s apparent desire to be in like one of Elena’s daughters’ shoes. Rather, she expresses anger at Pearl’s racial and class treason, for willing to be part of the ruling power that exercises violence

upon Black and poor people. Pearl buys into the dominant idea of “deserving” associated with meritocracy which, again, differentiates between deserving and undeserving people. Following that logic, she wants to have access to what Elena’s children have, she wants to be on the side of the deserving, the privileged. Therefore, Mia’s anger is ultimately towards the dominant narrative by which Pearl feels that she deserves a life where racial, gender and class structures will not operate, as is the case for Elena’s children.

Finally, inequity is also symptomatized by showing how while all women experience angering situations before gender expectations, diverse angers cannot be equalized. This is voiced in the following dialogue between Lexie and her African American boyfriend Brian (SteVonté Hart) in episode 7:

Lexie: “You have no idea how hard it’s been for me recently. What my mom expects from me.”

Brian: “How come every time, no matter what shit goes down, it always seems to be about you? [...] You know I am black, right? ... Whenever I tell people I got into Princeton the first thing that goes through their heads is, “Oh! It’s because he’s black.” But when you got into Yale...? They don’t think it’s because you stole a black girl’s story.

Lexie: Yeah! You are right. [...] But you don’t know what’s been like for me, either. What my mum expects from me. The fucking pressure I feel. Every day to be fucking perfect.

[...]

Brian: Lexie, you stole her discrimination as your own. You didn’t have to fucking do that.

4.3. The effects of affects: the ultimate outcome of anger in *Little Fires Everywhere* (Dimension 3)

These differential expressions of anger in *Little Fires Everywhere* also generate disparate affects: from the destructive and the inconsequential to the meaningful and productive. At first (and repeated at the beginning of every episode in the form of the title credits), the fire sweeps Elena’s house to its foundations. The destruction of the house opens the narrative to readings where anybody can imagine different, less oppressive futures for women. The fire is conjured narratively to consume the basis of the discomfort suffered by Lexie, Izzy, but also by Elena: the pressure to be perfect, to perform the sublime White femininity as a beacon of class and distinction.

Lexie’s anger in the last episode lights the flame that starts the fire when she shouts at her brothers: “Do you want to live in this fucking house? Do you want to become her? Because that’s exactly what’s gonna happen. Look at her. At who

she is. Look at what she did to Mia and Pearl. I mean, look at us" (Episode 8). Anger destroys the symbols of privilege: the Yale letter of admission, the violin, and ultimately the mansion. Fire burns the fallacies of harmony and lack of conflict in the home and in both maternal and marital relationships.

In a second level, it is clear that Mia's rage has an outcome in the form of art. Her interpretation of the gendered, racial and classist word is portrayed in artistic pieces that have both a creative and a vindictive dimension. Mia tells Izzy that once she was going to California and she encountered light coming over the horizon and when she got closer, she realized it was a fire. She watched on as the sun came up, "the Earth, everything was black. Scorched. And it felt exactly how I felt. It felt like the end of the world. But then I had Pearl, and I learned things that I didn't know before. Like that sometimes you have to scorch everything to start over. And after the burning, the soil is rich, and life can grow there. Life that is maybe even better than what was there before. And people are like that too. They are resilient. Even from total devastation, they start over. And they find a way."

Mia literally burns the oppressor (Elena) in one of her art pieces and, in her last work, Shaker's neighborhood is rebuilt as a golden cage, symbol of the repression displayed by white upper-middle-class wealthy standard of life and the type of relationships that are cultivated and promoted within. Her art, indeed, is clearly productive since witnesses/spectators feel challenged and touched as much as they can reflect on their own lives and perceptions. In the last episode, Pearl realizes the repression and hypocrisy that living in a golden cage entail. We also see how Elena, upon seeing Mia's work, has the ability to decode it and recognize herself in the metaphor of the golden cage, both as victim and as a perpetrator.

In a third level, rage drives characters to confront racist structures and to address the complex issue of difference between women under feminist theory. Along the show, Mia shows anger at Elena's position as Black woman's ally. Mia knows that Elena's position is trying to erase racialization in attending women's experiences. As we have seen, Elena insists on considering women's situation as the result of their choices, not their social positions. However, this discussion is richer and somewhat productive when, after Izzy's school protest (against selling babies of different races), Mia tells her that the painted Black faces Izzy added to the baby dolls are problematic because she is a white woman "dressing White [baby] dolls in blackface" and Izzy says: "It wasn't about that", to what Mia asks "What is it about then?":

Izzy: "I don't know, I guess it was about how we think of other people as less... how people like my mum and the McCulloughs, and everybody from Shaker, they think they can just buy whatever they want."

Mia: "But you're part of Shaker too, right? This place made you. You are not an exception because you want to be."

She utters whiningly "Okay. I guess nobody liked it." And Mia tells her "No, no, no. You do not get to challenge people and not let people challenge you back" (Episode 7).

Through the conversation, Mia shows Izzy's place of enunciation as a racialized (White) one, evidencing that points of view cannot be taken as universal or objective. This conversation points at the epistemological debate of the situated knowledge. Each position of vindication is rooted in structural axes. Confronting anger's legitimacy requires understanding the other's positions of vindication. Mia's accusation of Izzy's racism seeks to challenge racism, not discredit or deny Izzy's experiences and feelings. It seeks recognition of others' racialized, gendered and classed points of view in the framework of the fight for social justice as the strategy to build bridges between differences. The conversation between Mia and Izzy brings to mind Audre Lorde's statement when she asks: "What woman [...] is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?" (1981: 9-10). Thus, anger mobilizes a support relationship based on an ethics of care (Mia and Bebe) and an intersectional sorority (Mia and Izzy).

5. Conclusions

Little Fires Everywhere constitutes a ground-breaking example of how to depict female anger as both an expression of subjection and agency. The narrative allows for the validation of the protagonists' anger without bringing an easy closure, canceling it or stigmatizing it. As the series develops, the audience is made to understand and is invited to identify with the intricacies that have configured their very different lives and the frustrations that may lie below their respective rage. So, in that manner it portrays Mia and Elena as subjects with enough justification to express rage and endowed with agency to do so. However, the difficulties they encounter offer a nuanced landscape of the different subjugating conditions they have endured to formulate their anger and make it credible in their respective narrative backgrounds. The series, thus, breaks with the double bind by exposing the violence at the basis of the female rage (be it approached structurally or choice related) and legitimizing its expression by making it visible

without discrediting it. It rather suggests that both power and powerlessness appear closely tied to the grammars of recognition preceding them.

So, what do the expressions of these two women's anger bring to light? The White woman is angry within the parameters of a privileged position, at institutions that do not fully comply with meritocratic criteria, and at people who do not follow the rules. She erects herself as custodian of the status quo and gets angry at her offspring because she ultimately wants them to succeed. In that regard, Elena's anger is mostly unproductive; it is depicted as an individual emotion, which hinders the social dimension of rage as transformative. However, her anger directed to herself and to Izzy uncovers how defective the promise of women's life-work balance is as something attainable, and the myth of choice in relationship to motherhood.

In contrast, the Black woman's anger could be deemed productive inasmuch as it brings out into the open the inequality and oppression of structures and practices. The notion of "bad choices" is something she cannot even contemplate because there is no "choice" for non-White, disadvantaged people. Mia's anger is read structurally—it has sociopolitical and cultural roots. For instance, her anger towards her daughter is motivated by fear for her safety. Her expressions of rage also reveal how gender is not constitutive of a sense of alliance. The series does not allow for the White characters to recognize the role privileged White women play in the discrimination and violence towards Black and impoverished women. For that reason, it seems unfathomable that in *Little Fires Everywhere* anger could mobilize sorority and support networks. There is however a hint of the building of those in the expressions of care between Bebe and Mia, and intersectional sorority in the relationship between Mia and Izzy. Mia's belief in the inherent positive (transformative) power of negative emotions and deeds (explained to Izzy using the metaphor of a devastating fire) is contained in the title of the series. The "little fires everywhere" refers to the anger felt by women of any color, class, race, ability... that seems insignificant, but which, by virtue of being individual and very personal to each person, can burn a house down. The police officer who reports to Elena about the small fires fails to see the significance of it, something that, however, does not escape Elena and when she responds that she did it, we want to believe she could be as well recognizing how she has contributed to perpetuate the situation that makes women angry in the first place.

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