Karen Ann Schaller
Alison Winch

Generating Intimacy: Rage, Female Friendship, and the Heteropatriarchal Household on TV after #MeToo

This article looks at three post-2016, post-#MeToo television shows that depict friendships between heterosexual mothers, friendships that are forged through rage and murder: *Dead to Me*, *Good Girls*, and *Big Little Lies*. We situate these shows as indicative of a wider context where rage is increasingly legible in popular culture and holds particular kinds of political promise. We argue that the legibility of rage emerges from the specific historical, social, and economic forces of the present conjuncture, including increasing precarity and the unequal distribution of assets. In our shows, rage is directed against the lie of the postfeminist contract (McRobbie 2009) and the cruel optimism of the happy ever after (Berlant 2011), representing the possibility of subverting the heteropatriarchal household as well as politicizing social reproduction. This possibility suffuses these shows with the vitality of feminist promise, heightening the visual pleasures of intimacy between the women. The potential for subversion drives the shows' affect—what we call their "epistemerotics of rage": a narrative arc whose forward drive derives from watching women coming into their knowledge about men's violence. Yet rage also recuperates the household it seems to threaten, and we argue this has to do with the racializations of that household in the American imaginary. Our attention to rage reveals a historical shift in sensibility that, though potentially radical, also risks retrenching oppressions. Though they differ in their ability to grapple with this, these shows are useful case studies for how feminist inquiry responds to rage in the contemporary. q1

Post-2016 television programs that focus on female friendship offer a significant departure from the postfeminist whiteness of TV "girlfriendships" in the 2000s, which coalesced around a policing gaze between women, especially around body image and entrepreneurial behaviors (Winch 2013). Popular postfeminist culture at the time highlighted girliness, homemaking, and the affect of serenity (Negra 2009) and was centered on an ideal body image (read: white, thin, wealthy) and a positive affect (Gill 2007). But following the 2008 crash, the recession, and the attendant austerities that have hit women, people of color, and young people the hardest, we see a shift in

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how women are portrayed as being intimate with one another. Amy Dobson and Akane Kanai (2019) observe the "affective dissonances"—including insecurity, anger, and anxiety—of post-recession media and argue that disappointment and dissatisfaction run through these shows, puncturing the can-do and confident neoliberal representations of women in popular culture. Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman (2022) have also described the anti-heroism of post-2008 female characters: unlikable or self-sabotaging, they push back against aspirational discourses and conventional femininities.

We notice that affective dissonance is increasingly taking the shape of rage, and this dissonance underpins a trope of female friendship that recurs across a range of recent shows in the United States and the United Kingdom: 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 to protect her. In *Kevin Can Go F Himself* (AMC 2021–22), two female friends conspire to murder a controlling husband. In *Ginny and Georgia* (Netflix 2020–), a 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 the "AIBU" posts on Mumsnet, the popular UK website that has offered a networking forum for parents for over twenty years, 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 analyzed by Dobson and Kanai, and dissonance emerges from watching mothers act in ways that seemingly contradict the cultural logics of social reproduction. Given how frequently rage—and the violence it begets—is characterizing a generation of mothers and the intimacies they share, we extend what Linda Åhäll (2018) calls a "methodology of feminist curiosity," 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 2019–22), *Good Girls* (NBC 2018–21), and *Big Little Lies* (HBO 2017–19). 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 for 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 about the 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 simultaneously enables forms of repair and recuperation of the heteropatriarchal household it seems to threaten. We contend this has to do with the racializations 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 to recognize 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 the claims for its political potential.

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

Dead to Me is an award-winning Netflix dark comedy created by Liz Feldman (also creator of *2 Broke Girls*). It begins with the inception of a 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 nighttime 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 that 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.

Dead to Me 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 predate her husband's death. Both characters experience their feelings as sources of alienation from, and disdain for, 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 blonde Californian whiteness, producing an affective dissonance between the American promise of a happy femininity and the 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 the 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. While 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 are evidence, for Jen, that Judy has been victimized by her fiancé's cruelty. Indeed, in season 3 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 the women's killings of 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 is also set in California. Adapted from Lianne Moriarty's 2014 novel, the show centers 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 *Dead to Me*, violence is intimately linked to the emergence of female friendships. In the first episode, we find out that 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 realize 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 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 recognizes 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 *Dead to Me*, female friendship in *Big Little Lies* 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 abuse 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, as he 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 competing 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 on birth control, Ed's eyes linger on her 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 boxing bag, she asks: "Is that me? That punching bag?" Even the male children in the show raise the specter 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, *Big Little Lies* 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? Is there any male who doesn't, or won't, eventually? By withholding until the end of season 1 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 come into their knowledge about men's violence. With our own knowledge of the

characters' secrets, we watch them figure out that the male violence around them is irrefutable and fatal. In doing so, rage is animated by epistemerotics, and its affect fused with knowledge. Second, it posits women's friendship as bonded by that fusion, rather than by the affections of friendship per se: as Celeste says in the season 2 finale, "the friendship [the pretense that they don't know who murdered Perry or why] *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* sits closer to *Dead to Me*'s dark comedy than *Big Little Lies*' melancholic aesthetic and often eroticized lingering gaze; edgy with cynicism, *Good Girls*' soundtrack supplies affective dissonance and irony while the consciousness (or knowingness) of the camera's gaze orients *Good Girls* to the conjuncture from which the show emerges. These are not affluent Californian, upper-middle-class, wealthy women, nor are their homes aspirational. The show is set in Michigan, where Beth (Christina Hendricks), 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 struggling white single mother of a transgender son; white housewife 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 bills. Over the course of the show, the women become counterfeiters themselves; by the end of the series, Beth has become a dirty politician.

Unlike in *Dead to Me* and *Big Little Lies*, these female friendships do not emerge from male violence insofar as their intimacy predates the female characters meeting their husbands (or ex-husband, in Annie's case). Nor are the husbands (or ex-husbands) ever revealed or even intimated to be physically violent toward 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 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 her husband Dean met, as teenagers, when he and some friends made fun of her and trashed the diner where she worked. In these ways male characters knowingly exercise power over women in ways that—as in *Big Little Lies*—threaten the women's vitality. This is best exemplified by Dean, who cheats on Beth, gets the family into huge debt, and actively conceals this from her.

As in the other shows, the intimacy of these friendships is bound up in knowledge about 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 *Good Girls*, 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 victimized. 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 realize that 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 socioeconomic axes of politics, economics, and history, what Stuart Hall terms the "conjuncture" (see Gilbert 2019). Situating the shows as phenomena amid social forces—discourses, institutions, epistemes—helps us think about how these shows are enabled and circumscribed not only by the present moment but also by what they reveal and conceal about unequal and contested power relations. The conjuncture from which our shows emerge is dominated by deregulation in the sectors of finance and tech that has reduced workers' rights and devalued their 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" (2020, 69). This asset economy deepens historical inequalities as households become less dependent on wages and more on the intergenerational transmission of assets. This transmission is classed and racialized as oppressions are re-entrenched, favoring families with historical wealth. Cathy Park Hong charts the increased divergence between white and Black median families' assets, which, Linda Martín Alcoff argues, makes "the racial project of whiteness . . . in effect, an oligarchy" (in Hong

2021, 84; see also Alcoff 2015). Concomitant with the solidifying of oppressions, longer work hours, and reduced government support for children, mothers, and older people is a crisis in care and social reproduction (Briggs 2017; Care Collective 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. In addition, our shows assume the audience's sympathy for these women, in spite of the current rollback of women's rights, which might imply a conservative viewership who would be offended by a gendered emancipatory rhetoric. Indeed, contradictions, contestations, and struggles also mark this historical moment. Protests such as the Women's Marches expressed rage at Donald 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 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 generalized departure from conventional postfeminist narratives through their depiction and celebration of angry women as feminist solidarity. Feminist scholarship (Banet-Weiser 2018) has noted that popular feminism has gained attention and traction in branded spaces and also that women's anger is "increasingly legible within popular and commercial cultural forms" (Kay 2019, 591). The linkage between feminism and women's anger is widespread. The extent to which this is saturating the media landscape tells us that it is commercially viable.

Our shows speak to this through their marketing and promotional apparatus, which is centered around the linkage between feminist promise and rage. 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 shows progress toward gender equality and greater representation of women in key roles. Indeed critics' responses

to the shows often interpret their rage and violence as subversive, and the female friendships as feminist solidarity.[1] As many popular responses have noted, the shows are tapping into markets for female friendship, and the choice of actors is part of this marketability (Jones 2019): in casting actors whom, generationally, target audiences 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 construct intimate publics (Berlant 2008) between the audience and the stars (or the children of stars, in the case of Zoë Kravitz). Reese Witherspoon's career is indicative of this generational stickiness in the promotional culture of sisterhood. In 2002, her *Sweet Home Alabama* character retreated from a 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 show that she coproduced. While post-recession media representing young people reveals the breakdown of the postfeminist sexual contract, this breakdown is focalized around women who are generationally still "girls" (Dobson and Kanai 2019). The women in our shows are further along the conventional postfeminist lifecycle (Negra 2009), which links successful femininity to motherhood, with the implication that these mothers once bought into the cruel optimism of heterosexual fulfillment (Berlant 2011) that was so key to the rom-coms of the 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, Witherspoon's career is 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.

Popular culture has to grapple with the dissonant discourses that have arisen as the compromises of the postfeminist contract are violently exposed (McRobbie 2009). The shows we analyze indicate that the exposure is bound up with rage. That is not to say that rage has never before been a significant feeling in political or popular culture. Rather, the rage we observe 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 linked with feminist consciousness. While women's rage

[1] See Pearson (2017), Reilly (2017), Schulman (2019), and Tinubu (2019).

has usefully been read as a "safety valve" in popular culture (Orgad and Gill 2019) through which the political is rerouted as a "complaint" in the sentimental and private realm (Berlant 2008), the shows we are looking at do not fully cohere with these descriptions. Key to the displacement of rage outlined by Lauren Berlant is the relation between political critique and genre: in the 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; it is key to the narrative arcs across multiple seasons. This centering 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 tropes of subverted maternal goodness in films such as the 2106 *Bad Moms* and the 2017 *A Bad Moms Christmas*. As Jo Littler contends, "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" (2019, 499). Certainly, rage shares similarities with the "bad mom" in that both are tied up in questions about maternal responsibility and 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 the hedonism of "bad moms" and the rage we are tracking 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? In spite of the similarities between them, we demarcate hedonism and rage as different genres with distinctive sensibilities because their primary affects make different claims to knowledge and action.

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 means, 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*). When husbands let their wives down (through irresponsibility, lack of parental involvement, and infidelity), they are treated like additional children, with their failures routed back to a logic 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 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 (2019) argues that with 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 mobilization. The drama of the household is an index of broader struggles. Yet, we note that the gendered structure of the household remains intact. The men in our shows 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 behind the hashtag #YesAllMen and speculates about what happens when men can no longer be reproduced, through practices of mothering or gendered modalities of care, into heads of household for whom women can keep house.

Rage does lend radical potential to our shows—it no longer centers the crisis of social reproduction around women's failures to properly perform or adapt themselves to the femininities and sexual divisions of labor underpinning the postfeminist contract. What is centered 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 itself is never at stake. While it provides the scene for family life, its presence is as a cozy maternal space that "good" women 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 among the wealthiest characters, is at risk of being taken away through debt or bankruptcy, widening the social reproduction crisis 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 have defined as the asset economy.

Keeping house in an asset economy

The fact that husbands can no longer be relied upon to finance the home and endorse the division of labor structuring the gendered household is a problem for these mothers. But the fact 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 programs own their houses, whether this is inherited (Ruby and her husband Stan), multiply mortgaged (Beth and Dean), or leveraged as upper-class display and income in *Big Little Lies* and *Dead to Me*. The women must protect the house at all costs. It is when the property is threatened, such as when *Good Girls*' Dean remortgages it or when Gordon, Renata's husband in *Big Little Lies*, commits fraud, that the mothers' rage is unleashed. Indeed, the volatility of these men is a significantly pointed trope considering how, as Adkins, Cooper, and Konings point out, "assets are not static forms of property with stable and predictable values but are exposed to often volatile market valuations" (2020, 69). Given this, we suggest that the men's wilful unpredictability portrays 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 *Big Little Lies* 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 in *Good Girls*, Gordon 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 humor. 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." Characterized 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.

However, the home appears not only as a precarious asset but as a site of terrifying debt. This is potently portrayed in *Good Girls*, where "keeping house" explicitly includes the scrutiny of balance sheets and the management of liquidity—including income streams. *Good Girls* 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-centered homemaking, 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 facade of the (humorously portrayed) traditional housewife's scrapbooking and baking are Beth's criminal activities, which include "washing" counterfeit money in the tumble dryer. 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 programs. 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 reinvestment in another. Speculative femininities are also asking whether female friendship can be the source of reinvestment—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 racialized 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 United States. The racialized, gendered, and classed structures of the homestead—headed by the white man with the white wife, children, servants, and slaves differently straited beneath him—continue to inform the intersecting axes of oppression in the present. And the white middle-class family exerts a powerful imaginary as the ideal formation for racialized nation building (Collins 1989; see also Grewal et al. 2020). But what happens when this white, middle-class home is portrayed as a 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 link to the nation? This question is partly what underlies the narrative thrust of these shows. For example, in *Good Girls*, 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 number 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 racialized hierarchies of the friendship groups are problematically displayed. If we build on George Lipsitz's (2006) assertion that whiteness is inheritable property, 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 *Big Little Lies*, in which fetishized and wealthy white femininities are spectacularly mobilized in the display of the asset economy. But, as Radhika Mohanram argues, women *become* white "through their relationships with white men" (2007, xxiii). So we need to ask: once the white head of household has been murdered or humiliated, will the women continue to reproduce the nation and its racialized systems of oppression? How? And what role will female friendship play?

Rethinking the promise of rage

Given the speculations rage engenders, we can press its promise further. We have shown how the epistemerotics of rage lends these shows dynamism, where the thrill, for example, of Renata smashing her husband's train set derives from the audience witnessing, and even synergistically and generationally participating in, a moment when the ideological violence of the heteropatriarchy is 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 sutured to feminist consciousness. While this opens the shows to radical possibilities, we have also shown that the racialized economics of the household complicate that promise.

The epistemerotics of rage gains its power from its resemblance to what Sara Ahmed conceptualizes 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 1 of *Good Girls*: 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 her friends 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 visualized sequence of eye contact in silence, the moment is staged as epistemerotic: the women bond through the realization of shared knowledge. They're not trapped and desperate because something went wrong but because the situation they are in was produced by the mythology of goodness and optimism that secures their compliance and prevents them from living well. Beth's speech and her friends' reaction enunciates their realization of how cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) and the promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010) are structuring the scene in which they find themselves. As the penultimate episode of the first season, the scene signals 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 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 realize they already know. In *Dead to Me*, for example, the catalyst for Steve's murder is Jen realizing 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 *Big Little Lies*, 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 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 this is also because their epistemerotics of rage coheres men into a single political object, indeed makes them visible *as* a single political object, and reveals that the object has a history of violence. In so doing, rage disrupts a key mode for the social reproduction of heteropatriarchy: the willingness, in women, to see "their" men as individuals with the capacity for an exceptionality from heterosexual culture. Rage means locating male violence as the ordinary and unexceptional partner of love in the affective arrangements of the heteropatriarchal household. We *do* have politicization here: 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 politicized body; it is developed as a mode of attachment in place of attachment to men. And it is suturing 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 (Åhäll 2018, 44). We can notice that feminism is attached to dissonance, imbuing it with greater feminist promise than those positive feelings that we tend to associate with the social and the conventional. Because dissonance feels at odds with the ideological apparatus feminism critiques, it is linked to the emergence of a feminist subjectivity. But we might want to worry about a link between dissonance and consciousness because that risks posing dissonance as a natural precursor to transformation of our political world.

Naturalness and racialized repair

Naturalness is particularly important in *Big Little Lies*, and it's key to thinking about the troubling politics of rage and the racialized 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 naturalization 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 the men in our programs are become dislocated from their position as the natural object of women's intimacy, this happens through an *intensification* of, rather than a divestment from, natural bonds. Notice, for example, how in *Big Little Lies*, when Perry is killed, we have a third presence: the ocean. The epistemerotics when Jane recognizes him features the same kind of silent eye contact we noticed in *Good Girls*, 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 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 that rage produces are suffused with the political energy of the promise of a politicized female intimacy. However, the way that intimacy is visualized—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 a 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 naturalized as the intimate arrangement through which the heteropatriarchal household takes shape. Rage gives way to other vitalizing intimacies. Yet because rage is being sourced by a conceptualization of dissonance as a sign of natural justice, its vitality is not equally distributed; nor does it produce the same effects. In *Big Little Lies*, the action begot by rage 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. When 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; 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 it is Bonnie who is called on 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 racialized 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 naturalizing this arrangement even in the moment marketed to them as feminist consciousness.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of season 2 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 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 the other women join Bonnie at the police station as she turns herself in, the show demonstrates its willful ignorance (Mills 2007) of how she is differently articulated to the state's regulation of justice. As Anna Marie 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 (2018) 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. Indeed, this aspect of the show's representation of Bonnie is notably regressive, raising important questions about how Black women are imagined in postfeminist media in light of the complexities Francesca Sobande (2019) identifies around the entanglement of Black feminism and postfeminist tropes in television. We posit this unwillingness as key to understanding the repair work that rage does in *Big Little Lies*: 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 *Dead to Me*, whose speculative femininities include speculation, 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 all the relationships in the three shows we have been looking at here, the one 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 the possibility that their intimacy might be 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 that 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 dysfunctionality visually affirmed by Ben's image as the identical twin of the man Jen murdered.

Like *Dead to Me*, *Good Girls* also denaturalizes 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, tropes of nature are connected to the women's wealth, whether the Californian ocean or Mexican beaches, spaces that work to express the "natural" justice of their rage. But the women in *Good Girls* are working class, and barriers to class mobility are narrative drivers. In *Good Girls* 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 vitalizing and irreverent: their rage not only eschews previous "respectability politics" (Wood 2019, 611) but gleefully disrupts it. *Good Girls* joyously deploys the vitality of rage to the point that the three women live for the collective pleasures of criminal activity, making this show the most deliberately cynical and troubling

of the American home among the three. This includes how it speaks to the racialization of the American household.

Although Beth constantly positions herself as the head of the friendship group, Ruby is not a best friend sidekick 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's insistence in *Yearning* (1999) on the importance of home as refuge and intimacy for Black families. Notably, despite the conflicts created by the friends' criminality, Stan does show a willingness to take on the risks associated with these speculative femininities. But Ruby's story line 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 the fact that it concludes with Ruby's dilemma delineates the extent to which it recognizes 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 politicized attachment. However, where the Black household is differently sutured 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 racializations of rage 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 sutured 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 three 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 center the importance of bonds, albeit detached from violent and inconstant men and reattached to female friends, performing subjectivities we have called "speculative femininities." But while this produces a radical loosening of heteropatriarchal structures, each household, in each show, signifies differently. *Big Little Lies* resolves the dissonance of rage through retrenchment, offsetting the riskiness

of female friendship through renewed investment in whiteness. In *Dead to Me*, 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. *Good Girls* goes furthest in what it is able to do with that knowledge: it exposes and satirizes the work of the household in the current conjuncture and is able to frame these forces through the 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.

Appendix A

TV Shows

Am I Being Unreasonable? (BBC 2022)
Bad Sisters (AppleTV+ 2022)
Big Little Lies (HBO 2017–2019)
Dead to Me (Netflix 2019–2023)
Ginny and Georgia (Netflix 2020–)
Girlfriends (ITV 2018)
Good Girls (NBC 2018–2021)
Kevin Can Go F Himself (Amazon 2021)
2 Broke Girls (CBS 2011–2017)

Appendix B

Films

Bad Moms. 2016. Directed by Jon Lucas and Scott Moore. Burbank, CA: STX Entertainment.

A Bad Moms Christmas. 2017. Directed by Jon Lucas and Scott Moore. Burbank, CA: STX Entertainment.

School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing
University of East Anglia

Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies Department
Goldsmiths University of London

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Abstract

This article looks at three post-2016, post-#MeToo television shows that depict friendships between heterosexual mothers, friendships that are forged through rage and murder: *Dead to Me* (Netflix 2019–22), *Good Girls* (NBC 2018–21), and *Big Little Lies* (HBO 2017–19). We situate these shows as indicative of a wider context where rage is increasingly legible in popular culture and where it holds particular kinds of political promise. We argue that the legibility of rage emerges from the specific historical, social, and economic forces of the present conjuncture, including increasing precarity and the unequal distribution of assets. In our shows, rage is directed against what Angela McRobbie calls the "lie of the postfeminist contract" and what Lauren Berlant terms the "cruel optimism of the happy ever after," representing the possibility of subverting the heteropatriarchal household as well as politicizing social reproduction. This possibility suffuses these shows with the vitality of feminist promise, heightening the visual pleasures of intimacy between the women. The potential for subversion drives the shows' affect—what we call their "epistemerotics of rage": a narrative arc whose forward drive derives from watching women coming into their knowledge about men's violence. Yet rage also recuperates the household it seems to threaten, and we argue this has to do with the racializations of that household in the American imaginary. Our attention to rage reveals a historical shift in sensibility that, though potentially radical, also risks retrenching oppressions. Though they differ in their ability to grapple with this, these shows are useful case studies for how feminist inquiry responds to rage in the contemporary moment.

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