WHITE MATERNITY AND A CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION IN LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE

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Abstract:

This article seeks to illuminate the role white suburban mothers play in upholding homeland maternity and neoliberal multiculturalism in the United States. The maintenance of these two organizing power structures hinge on white motherhood, making the relationship of white mothers, race, and class an important site of analysis. The intersections of class, race, and motherhood are examined in Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere*, displaying the dominant economic and social interests of the U.S. and the specific power of white maternity in these systems, and making *Little Fires Everywhere* a useful text in which to ground this examination.
On a quiet afternoon in a neighborhood of Shaker Heights, Ohio, the peace is shattered by Bebe Chow pounding on Linda and Mark McCullough’s front door, begging to see her baby. Mrs. McCullough does not answer, just as she did not answer the phone calls Bebe made before going to their house. While Bebe pleads to see her daughter, Mrs. McCullough locks herself inside with the baby until her husband comes home. Flanked by police officers, Mr. McCullough confronts Bebe, repeating, “You have no right to be here” (Ng 126). Bebe is forced to leave the McCullough home, but she soon begins the fight for legal custody of her child. Bebe and Mrs. McCullough are central figures in the custody battle for “little Mirabelle McCullough—or, depending on what side you were on, May Ling Chow” (Ng 1). The custody battle is also a primary catalyst for the title of Celeste Ng’s novel, Little Fires Everywhere. Sparks fly in clashes over motherhood, race, class, and what it means to belong in this American suburb and in the United States at large.

Enduring interest in these provocative, deeply personal themes combined with the empathetic and engaging way Ng explores these ideas helped make Little Fires Everywhere a national and international success. Since its 2017 publication, Little Fires Everywhere earned numerous accolades and made The New York Times bestselling list. The text was also adapted into a Hulu miniseries that premiered in March 2020 starring Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington, further showcasing its popularity and a common interest in the story-driving ideas.

Though this paper will focus on Mrs. McCullough and Bebe Chow, the main characters are Mrs. Richardson and Mia Warren. Mrs. Richardson is a third-generation resident of Shaker Heights. The married mother of four firmly espouses the city’s motto, “Most communities just

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1 “Little Fires Everywhere.” CELESTE NG. celesteng.com/little-fires-everywhere
happen; the best are planned” in guiding her regimented, picture-perfect life (Ng 10). Mrs. Richardson’s previously unshaken worldview is challenged when Mia moves to Shaker Heights with her 15-year-old daughter, Pearl. The single mother is an artist, and does not, as Elena Richardson’s teenaged son puts it, have a “real job” (Ng 24). Instead, Mia works odd jobs to make ends meet while centrally focusing on her true passion: photography. They move into a rental owned by Mrs. Richardson; the families grow increasingly intertwined and tensions arise, ultimately centering on the mothers and underscoring their differences. The titular ‘little fires everywhere’ refer to the metaphorical conflicts sparking throughout the text and literally to how the book opens: with Isabelle ‘Izzy’ Richardson setting her family’s stately suburban home on fire. Her motives are initially unknown, but the divisive custody battle for May Ling is alluded to, demonstrating the centrality of that issue to provoking other tensions in the community.

Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. McCullough are both white, upper middle-class women born and raised in suburbia. They contrast with Mia and Bebe, both working-class single mothers who are outsiders to Shaker Heights. Mia’s race is not explicitly revealed in the novel, but in the television series, she is a Black woman. Bebe immigrated to the U.S. from China, and the two women meet while working as servers at a Chinese restaurant. Bebe confides to Mia that she abandoned her baby.

Initially living in California with a stable job, Bebe’s partner convinces her to move to Cleveland, Ohio with the enticement of lower costs of living increasing the possibility of buying a home. Shortly after they move, Bebe gets pregnant and her partner abandons her. Left with language barriers, few resources, insecure housing and work, and no support system, Bebe does her best to care for May Ling but is ultimately pushed to make an impossible choice. Running dangerously low on food, baby supplies, and unable to pay her bills, Bebe wraps her two-month-
old child in every blanket and article of baby clothes she has and leaves her on the steps of a fire station with a note: “This baby name May Ling. Please take this baby and give her a better life” (Ng 115). Afterwards, Bebe is found in a park by police and brought to a shelter. Once Bebe is rehabilitated, she goes back to find May Ling only to find that no one knows what has come of the baby. Bebe is left to wonder what became of her child until Mia helps through her connection with the Richardsons, who recently attended Mirabelle McCullough’s first birthday party. The Chinese American baby was brought into the white couple’s arms when she was found on the steps of a Cleveland fire station.

Mia puts the pieces together and tells Bebe who has her baby. Both mothers’ struggles are made visible in the novel; the narrator describes the McCulloughs’ struggle to have a baby, from multiple miscarriages, years of doctor appointments and prescriptions, discouraging medical news of infertility, and long waits and disappointments as the McCulloughs try to adopt only to have other couples chosen over them. The McCulloughs raise May Ling, or to them, Mirabelle, for about 10 months before Bebe finds her and begins trying to get legal custody. Mrs. McCullough sees herself as May Ling’s mother, and the couple refuses to give up their plan to adopt her. Bebe is technically in a legal battle with the state for custody, but the state is an extension of the McCulloughs. If the state decides Bebe should not be granted custody, they will recommend the McCulloughs receive legal rights to the child. Ultimately, the state chooses to not grant Bebe custody. May Ling will, ostensibly, be Mirabelle McCullough—until Bebe breaks the rules keeping her from her child. She goes to the McCullough house and waits until they fall asleep, then enters through the unlocked door and spirits her baby into the night, onto a plane, and back to China where the McCulloughs cannot find them (Ng 331). Intersections of white feminism and maternity, racism, and a nation built on capitalism made it impossible for Bebe to
have legal rights to her own child in the U.S. and so made it impossible for her to stay. The

custody trial lays bare the complicated nature of maternity and identity, exposing the ways class
and race intersect to constitute motherhood and rights in the U.S. in provocative ways. Bebe’s
position as a low-income woman of color in opposition to Mrs. McCullough as a wealthy white
woman is critical to this reading of Little Fires Everywhere.

Due to the recency of its publication, there is no scholarly work yet published on Little
Fires Everywhere. However, popular reviews provide a useful starting point into critical
conversation. As mentioned, the novel was well-received. Critics noted the empathetic way in
which all sides of every story are told and the centering of women’s voices as particular strengths
of Ng’s sophomore work (Henderson; Hawthorne). However, the marginalization of diverse voices
was a point of criticism. Some reviewers expressed displeasure that characters who are
people of color, such as Mr. Yang, Brian Avery, Ed Lim, and Bebe Chow, either fall under
tropes or were not heard from directly enough through the novel (Lee; Manzella). It is true that
these characters are not as fully fleshed out as Mrs. Richardson or Mia. For instance, Mr. Yang
is described as a working-class man who immigrated from China and keeps to himself. He rents out
the bottom floor of Mrs. Richardson’s home and is an excellent tenant, fixing up the house and
offering melons from his garden. Mr. Yang only appears a handful of times throughout the text,
often to offer a brief outside perspective of something going on in more central characters’ lives.
His perspectives on Shaker Heights or the Richardsons or society at large are not shown by the
narrator. The other characters of color also align with this model. Some backstory is given, a
general sense of their lives and ways in which they function in the suburb are provided, but
significant page space and dialogue are not dedicated to delving into their thoughts and
experiences.
While the concerns of these reviewers are understandable and valid in the historical and contemporary context of the U.S., their critical stance is not entirely productive to driving ideas in this novel. Ng’s work is centered on unpacking national ideological empowerment of whiteness. The interest is directed toward exploring the relationship between race, class, and gender and how those characteristics form lives, choices, and social positions. *Little Fires Everywhere* focuses on power hierarchies in suburbia, and these characters all productively reveal the racist biases set against them that in turn reflect ways neoliberal multiculturalism operates.

Neoliberal multiculturalism is the commodification of culture in order to empower the free market, achieve a post-racial society transcending race and ethnicity, and ultimately establish consumption of material goods as the prevailing national culture. The idea of multiculturalism was formed on the basis of social liberalism and nationalism, seeking to remedy disadvantages for disenfranchised groups and enable citizens to work across differences for the good of the country. However, in its deployment within neoliberalism, multiculturalism is not enacted as it was originally intended. Neoliberal multiculturalism seeks to dismiss racism and other such discriminatory systems without recognizing the intersectional relationships these systems have within the organizing structure of capitalism. This concept was generated in response to the post-World War II mobilization of people of color calling for political, economic, and social change, which Howard Winant calls the “racial break” that permanently changed white supremacy (33). The system could not maintain as it was, but rather than recognizing and transforming systems of inequality, the U.S. shifted its model to the notion of race as cultural difference rather than biological. The free market is upheld as the solution to racism in America; if citizens abide by the new dominant cultural norms, such as a heteronormative family unit and
middle-class socioeconomic position, they succeed. If not, their deviance from the cultural markers of the national identity result in exclusion from wealth, resources, and opportunities. Exclusion on this basis is made to seem natural and fair, upholding capitalism as a solution to the power disparities present on a national and global scale as well as a key apparatus to America’s status of social and economic model (‘The Spirit of Neoliberalism’ 7). Capital acts as the primary signifier for participation and inclusion in the national culture.

The neoliberal multiculturalism framework enables one to clearly identify these socioeconomic structures and demands at work in the Shaker Heights. Diversity is encouraged if it is materially represented, such as by food or art, and if those characters of color or Black characters submit to normative expectations of the suburb. These include heteronormativity, having a nuclear family, and working a white-collar job in order to own material things that signal class status, like a house and cars.

The Avery family is able to live in Shaker Heights in large part because of their adherence to capitalistic norms. Brian Avery is the teenage son of a doctor and lawyer. They are a Black family, and he calls his parents Cliff and Clair since they “exude a certain Cosbyish vibe” (Ng 53). The Avery family is able to live in Shaker Heights because they are wealthy, respected professionals abiding by the material conditions of the suburb, taking after one a long beloved television family in pop culture. The Huxtable family in *The Cosby Show* (1986-92) demonstrates how neoliberal multiculturalism constitutes its subjects. As described in a *New York Times* piece about the cultural impacts of the show, the Huxtable family was widely regarded as an archetypal American family that happened to be Black, centering family as more important than race. The family was upwardly mobile, and the parents worked in highly respected careers. These characteristics are crucial to challenging racist stereotypes in neoliberal
multiculturalism. The show further demonstrated its alignment with neoliberal multiculturalism by featuring Black art, incorporating Black education institutions into the show, and hiring a professional to ensure the show did not depict racist stereotypes (Coates). Neoliberal multiculturalism largely dictated how a Black family had to be depicted in order to be accepted into mainstream consciousness. Blackness could be shown in art and music and familiar institutions such as schools but had to otherwise adhere to social norms. The Huxtables were accepted into mainstream culture not because the nation was making antiracist strides, but because they depicted a wholesome family that subscribed to capitalistic ideologies. White Americans wanted to think that by loving the Huxtables, they were in turn not racist because they loved a Black family. The Huxtable family did not challenge presiding faith in a capitalistic system. This enhanced understanding of the Huxtable family in *The Cosby Show* offers further insight into the way the Avery family operates in Shaker Heights as an idyllic family first and Black family second, illustrating how neoliberal multiculturalism shapes racialized subjects.

Another character of color includes the aforementioned Mr. Yang, who furthers the idea of “model minorities” in suburbia. He is noted as annually bringing Mrs. Richardson homegrown Chinese melons, a gesture likened to a tithe in illustrating this hierarchy since it evokes divine power and compulsory capital offerings in recognizing the mercy, justice, and strength of a higher power. Mr. Yang is the ideal working-class person; hard-working, reserved, and performs acts that acknowledge the hierarchy of power in race and wealth operating in the U.S.

*Little Fires Everywhere* is concerned with the power, perspectives, and practices associated with whiteness. Contrary to the critiques by Lee and Manzella, these characters should not be read as problematic in the ongoing struggle to center the voices of marginalized people. Rather, they are successfully employed to show how racialized subjects have to act in
order to meet normative criteria and be accepted into the community. The conditions set for marginalized identities operates on the local level within Shaker Heights while also demonstrating the limits to being accepted as a national citizen. These characters further offer opportunity to frame and critique whiteness. If they are not given enough voice or are pushed to the margins of the story, it is because readers are viewing what white characters both perceive and demand of Black people and people of color in Shaker Heights. These conditional viewpoints reflect the ideologies present in neoliberal multiculturalism, where race and ethnicity can be accepted into mainstream spaces like a suburb only if material characteristics are present to align racialized subjects with the interests of capitalism.

Suburbs are built on discrimination and on creating a homogenous, idealized national identity. In the 1950s and 1960s, the ‘White Flight’ movement occurred where white people moved en masse from racially diverse cities that were beginning to be desegregated to suburban neighborhoods, where formal and informal methods of exclusion enabled continued segregation especially on the bases of race and ethnicity, but also on class. The perceptions of suburbs as clean, open, safe refuges from the crime-ridden and dirty cities result from long-term “majority-enforced social norms and outright discrimination,” and the enduring iterations of those norms make white and mid- to high-income people seem to naturally belong in the suburbs (Coon 109). Federal and state laws contributed to this notion; for example, there were ordinances in place to specifically bar non-white people from moving into majority white neighborhoods. When explicitly racist zoning laws were banned in 1917, formal and informal methods, such as ordinances, freeze-outs, buyouts, violence, threats, and intimidation, continued to enforce segregated neighborhoods (Coon 110). Housing discrimination and generational wealth and privilege passed down through white families helped those families retain material resources and
therefore, power, even as formal methods of exclusion theoretically ceased. Whiteness is the foundation of suburbs, and class disparities and discrimination are as pervasive in suburbs as in the rest of the nation, if not more.

Characters in Shaker Heights believe the town sets a standard for progressivism and inclusivity others should emulate. The eldest Richardson child says, “I mean, we’re lucky. No one sees race here” (Ng 42). Her perception is that Shaker Heights is a utopic post-racial society. This belief is false, evidenced from the town’s history and challenged throughout the novel. In 1925, just over 70 years earlier from the time Little Fires Everywhere takes place, a Black surgeon moved to Shaker Heights with his wife and teenage daughter in the wake of Buchanan v. Warley. The family’s home was vandalized, and hundreds of community members rallied to protest the sale (Dawson 120). The town origins were rooted in legally and socially preventing Black people and Jewish people from owning property and moving into the community. While these rules, regulations, and attitudes changed through time, the town is underpinned by overtly racist systems which continue to be carried out through more informal methods.

One such method occurred in 1976 with the Shaker Barricades. Traffic barrels were placed on six streets in Shaker Heights, inhibiting motorists from driving into and through the town. Officially, the barriers were placed to mitigate traffic jams and accidents, but local papers reported no abnormal or concerning traffic data. In opposition to their claimed safety feature, the barriers were perceived as attempts to exclude Black people. At this time, the demographics of the suburban border between Cleveland and Shaker Heights were changing to include more

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Buchanan v. Warley came before the Supreme Court of the United States in 1917 and addressed a civil ordinance in Louisville, Kentucky prohibiting real estate sales to Black people in areas populated by a majority white people and vice versa. The ruling found that this ordinance violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Now, this decision is generally regarded as serving to uphold property rights rather than equal protection rights. This case also marks the beginning of private restrictive covenants, which were not outlawed until the 1950s.
people of color as a result of the Black suburban migration in the 1960s, thereby making many people read and protest the barriers as racist attempts to keep suburbs populated primarily with white people (Sisley 2019). Other informal methods of exclusion continue today; *Little Fires Everywhere* shows what material and social conditions Black people and people of color must now meet in order to be accepted as part of the dominant community, such as an income large enough to afford a home in the town.

White mothers are iconic to suburbia; shows like *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) showcase suburbia as an idyllic lifestyle, with the families domestically headed by angelic, white mothers, evoking ‘angel in the house’ imagery. While contemporary depictions like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) and *Modern Family* (2009-2020) challenge suburban norms of white heteronormativity by introducing characters of color, LGBTQ+ characters, and other identities and ideas that complicate normative views, white mothers are still embedded in popular consciousness as figureheads of suburbia. By situating *Little Fires Everywhere* in the suburb of Shaker Heights, dominant national ideologies and intersections of class, race, and maternity are able to be clearly identified and critically examined.

Maternity is often viewed as a personal endeavor, but in fact maternity is deeply involved in nation-building. This has been the case through history; for example, “republican motherhood” frames how maternity played a crucial role in shaping the U.S. before, during, and

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3 In a notable exclusion, the novel’s narrator neglects the problematic history of Shaker Heights when expositing the town (Ng 9-10). This exclusion suggests the narrator is ignorant to the depth of racist and classist roots grounding suburbs and is taking the main characters’ depictions of Shaker Heights at face value. This omission undermines the otherwise omniscient, somewhat snide narrator that seems to believe they do know all in the town.

4 ‘The Angel in the House’ comes from a poem titled the same that depicts how Victorian women were expected to behave as wives. The ideal wife and woman should be submissive to her husband, passive, pious, and pure. Characters like June Cleaver and Carol Brady are similarly, if less overtly problematically, portrayed as ideal wives and mothers.
after the Revolutionary War.5 “Homeland maternity,” a term coined by Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz, identifies the relationship between maternal rights and state surveillance of women’s bodies as a contemporary iteration of republican motherhood in times of national insecurity. This concept helps show how and why ideological state apparatuses interpellate elite women as naturally meant to be mothers.6 Maternity is constructed as a public role grounded on the “longstanding alignments between elite women’s childbearing and the security of the nation” (Fixmer-Oraiz 34). Dominant rhetoric of motherhood encourages women to “do it all” and warns that postponing childbearing in favor of career-building or other personal aspirations could lead to infertility. The current perspective where maternity is expected of white women upholds the “mythic status of motherhood, its valorization as the pinnacle of wealthy White womanhood and, in a postfeminist twist, the apex of women’s empowerment,” argues Fixmer-Oraiz (57). The inability to have a baby, especially if one postpones having children in favor of personal pursuits, is marked as the worst nightmare for elite white women since they would not be contributing to the nation through a capitalistic logic.

While Mrs. McCullough is not described as waiting to try having a child for her career, she is nevertheless subject to these dominant ideological beliefs. Not being able to biologically have a child is portrayed as the worst nightmare for a woman like Mrs. McCullough, and homeland maternity offers further understanding into the depth of Mrs. McCullough’s desperate desire to have a baby. This desire comes in part because Mrs. McCullough is interpellated to believe her right to a child is inherent to her identity as a white woman. This deeply rooted

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5 Republican motherhood defines the 18th century attitude that motherhood was the national duty of women. Women were expected to raise future citizens to believe in republican ideology, thus contributing to nation-building efforts and strengthening national identity.
6 Interpellation is an Althusserian term identifying the operation where citizens are made subjects ideology created and embedded in ideological state apparatuses. Examples of ISAs through which this process takes place include churches, schools, media, and the family.
ideological belief helps explain Mrs. McCullough’s refusal to return May Ling to Bebe. Homeland maternity aids in the identification of the state’s role in managing its subjects so national interests, rooted in whiteness and capitalism, are maintained. Homeland maternity and neoliberal multiculturalism intersect to empower Mrs. McCullough and her legal “rights” to having a baby at any cost.

Maternity is extolled for the women who fit into the dominant ideologies of white supremacy and material power. Conversely, women of color, Black women, and low-income or poor women’s rights to maternity are policed and controlled by the state and have been through history. For example, the Page Act of 1875 effectively barred East Asian, especially Chinese, women from entering the U.S., in turn preventing Asian men from forming families due to anti-miscegenation laws (Fixmer-Oraiz 8). The perpetual foreigner stereotype is connected to exclusionary acts such as the Page Act; this stereotype defines Asian-presenting people as never being fully ‘American’ because of a perception of an innate exoticism represented on the body and in cultural practices. Homeland maternity identifies the systems of exclusion and stereotyping intended to create a dominant perception that someone like Bebe, a Chinese immigrant, is not meant to be a mother and perhaps is not meant to be in America at all. Mothers on welfare also demonstrate this skewed preference; Fixmer-Oraiz points out they are accused of making poor decisions. By rendering them as individually responsible and in control of choices that lead them to rely on welfare, she argues, mothers on welfare are systemically and strategically vilified in order to distract from structural inequalities and issues (24).

Bebe’s struggles exemplify such problematic social structures. She has trouble finding work in general due to her rudimentary English-speaking skills. According to a study done by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, English-speaking ability significantly impacts individuals’
earnings. People who spoke a language other than English at home were less likely to be employed, less likely to find full-time work when employed, and, even having found full-time employment, experience lower median earnings than those who spoke only English (Day and Shin 6). Bebe works jobs that pay the state-mandated minimum wage, which is not sufficient to pay for rent, utility bills, and groceries (Ng 255). In the novel, many people do not point out the structural issues largely contributing to Bebe’s economic struggles that ultimately, in tandem with emotional distress and not having a support system or knowledge of available resources, resulted in her feeling her only choice was to leave May Ling at the fire station. Instead, Bebe is accused by the media, residents of Shaker Heights, and the state of being an irresponsible, negligent mother, one who does not deserve to be a mother to her child at all. Bebe’s opponents argued that “a mother who abandoned her child did not deserve a second chance” (Ng 151). Some descriptions offered from the slew of media stories about Bebe’s fitness as a mother included claims that she was “unstable, unreliable, an example of the worst kind of mother” (Ng 253). These maligning opinions show the operations of homeland maternity set to dissuade women of color, Black women, poor women, and other marginalized identities from having children, and Bebe is cast as an unfit mother due to racist and classist ideologies subjecting her to being perceived in a negative, even threatening, way. There is no empathy for the systemic factors pushing Bebe to make an impossible, painful decision. Rather, she is viewed as irresponsible and parasitic; as a poor woman, Bebe has no right to be a mother. Fixmer-Oraíz writes, “A single, low-income mother who lacks a formal or sufficient relationship to the labor market is marked as an illegitimate consumer and choice-maker—an undeserving beneficiary of public assistance” (67). Capitalism erodes the welfare state by placing socioeconomic onus on individuals despite resources and opportunities being systemically inadequate and inaccessible.
This intersection with homeland maternity demonstrates how and why Bebe, as a poor Chinese woman, is vilified in mainstream rhetoric.

The U.S. is a capitalist state that seeks to strengthen the free market through high levels of material consumption. In neoliberal multiculturalism, it also seeks to achieve a national culture based on materialism, thereby requiring cultures to be understood and practiced through commodities only. Bebe is a racialized, foreign subject who is not an active consumer; she cannot be counted on to raise a child that would be fully indoctrinated into the material-based, national culture driven by the free market and sold as a solution to racism. Her race, ethnicity, and class are all identity markers that make her a threat to the state and perceived as undeserving of motherhood. In contrast, Mrs. McCullough is an ideal consumer and, as a white woman, is ideologically conceived to be viewed as a natural maternal figure. These characteristics empower her throughout the trial, but they are also crucial to identifying the problematic role white maternity plays in upholding neoliberal multiculturalism through consumption and materialism.

According to Forbes, women drive 70-80 percent of consumer purchasing globally through their buying power and influence (Brennan). This figure is attributed to the typical caregiver role women take and reflects their direct and indirect influence on consumer choices. Buying power in the U.S. differs significantly by race and ethnicity. As of 2018, white people made up 76.4 percent of the population but held an 82.1 percent share of buying power (Humphreys). These statistics demonstrate that white American women are critical drivers to the domestic and global economy. In a capitalist state, this buying power positions white women to have marked social and economic influence. Women, especially white women, are key to the nation’s capitalist system. Mrs. McCullough’s wealth is referenced often throughout the text,
revealing both how materialism is valued and even required in the U.S. and how Mrs.
McCullough understands culture as consumption.

From casually maxing out their Visa when first getting custody of May Ling (Ng 114) to
having all the “necessary resources” for raising a child, the McCulloughs are viewed by many
Shaker Heights residents as having more to offer the baby than Bebe (Ng 257). Informed by
hyper-materialist American culture and the normative status signals found in American suburbia,
one could imagine those “necessary resources” include the home large enough for May Ling to
have a bedroom and a playroom to hold the many toys the McCulloughs acquired for the baby.
Other prospective resources might include extracurriculars, family vacations, a car when May
Ling gets her driver’s license, social connections and power to help her succeed through
secondary school and get into a top university where the tuition will be paid for with ease by a
family in the “ninety-sixth percentile financially” (Ng 257). These resources are not required
to raise a child nor should they theoretically carry significant weight in a custody trial.
Nevertheless, the capitalistic ideologies empowering materialism and active consumption, well-
shown by Mrs. McCullough’s exorbitant spending immediately upon getting to have a baby, are
socially naturalized. It is difficult for the average American to resist the learned valuation of
excess consumption, even when set against the essential parent-child connection that is being
threatened. Republican motherhood introduced a new synthesis of the public and private spheres,
making domesticity as important as politic and civic duties (Nash). As the neoliberal iteration of
republican motherhood, homeland maternity operates so that women are “made individually
responsible for juggling motherhood and employment,” establishing standards for women to
have and raise children while also contributing to economic growth of the nation (Fixmer-Oraiz
57). This encourages their position as leading consumers.
While Mrs. McCullough’s role as a consumer is upheld as evidence for her rights to custody, it also operates as a site that exposes the problematic beliefs embedded in whiteness and capitalism that play out in neoliberal multiculturalism. Mrs. McCullough, a lifelong resident of Shaker Heights, has been raised to understand culture as consumption, and, in neoliberal multiculturalism, that race and ethnicity are experienced through commodities. Her problematic explanations as to how she and her husband will provide May Ling with a culturally rich home reflect this understanding. In an interview, Mrs. McCullough says that they are ensuring May Ling will stay connected to her birth culture through the additions of Asian art to their home and through food, citing that the one-year-old already loves rice (Ng 153). One critic rebuked this statement in their review, writing, “Consumption is not just a metaphor here; it is the sum total of her understanding of culture and identity and of the fact that she who has everything is entitled to still more, even to a baby to complete the picture of perfection” (Zakira). In lieu of the lived culture with which Bebe would raise the child, neoliberal multiculturalism values the consumptive way Mrs. McCullough understands culture because it will contribute to and expand the free market, drawing in more diverse participation and production to make it seem as though the U.S. genuinely values a diverse population. In addition to Mrs. McCullough’s reduction of culture to the exchange of capital, Zakira points out that these moments also expose that Mrs. McCullough feels entitled to have a baby, even one that is a different race and ethnicity than herself. Despite her cultural ignorance and color-blindness, Mrs. McCullough is empowered by homeland maternity to recognize herself as unequivocally maternal due to her role as a market actor. In other words, Mrs. McCullough is viewed as deserving maternity because she will induct her child into capitalistic American social and economic norms. Therefore, she is within her
rights to have custody of May Ling, cutting May Ling off from being raised by her birth mother and with her birth culture.

Homeland maternity identifies numerous ways elite women are interpellated to believe they have inherent rights to motherhood. One way the white women characters in *Little Fires Everywhere* are shown to have been interpellated is through the market as an ideological state apparatus. Mrs. Richardson reveals herself as having the same problematic understanding of race and ethnicity as her friend when Mr. Richardson asks if she thinks Mrs. McCullough can raise a Chinese American baby. Mrs. Richardson jumps to her friend’s defense. She remembers Mrs. McCullough playing a loving mother to her dolls as a child, thinking of “how deep that longing to be a mother” ran in her and thinks that longing, evident so early in life, is proof Mrs. McCullough deserves to be granted rights to May Ling (Ng 269). In this statement, Mrs. Richardson implies Mrs. McCullough is meant to be a mother, a belief tied to the operation of homeland maternity.

Mrs. Richardson’s invocation of dolls as an example of Mrs. McCullough’s deep maternal instincts also shows a way in which white women are interpellated to be mothers. The options of toys available at stores reflect the social values such as whiteness, and reflect that maternity is still centered as an, if not the most, important role for women. Toys are highly gendered to reflect familial roles and expectations of girls, and dolls are central to most young girls’ lives. Dolls encourage motherhood as an ideal role; dolls are burped, fed, and rocked as little girls play that they are mothers, loving their dolls the way their mothers love them. However, dolls of color and dolls fashioned to demonstrate cultural diversity are difficult to find, which is an important piece of lawyer Ed Lim’s argument as he defends Bebe in the custody battle. Mrs. McCullough shares that May Ling has at least a dozen dolls, but Ed Lim discovers
most of them are blonde and all of them are white. He reveals that there are no Chinese Barbies
available on the market, no dolls that look like May Ling with few exceptions, and those
exceptions are either culturally inaccurate and offensive, or expensive (Ng 261-3). It is easiest to
obtain white, blonde dolls, dolls that do not look like May Ling or Bebe.

Playing with dolls may seem innocuous, but in fact, the exclusion of people of color
along with exclusionary and disrespectful portrayals of cultures in the production of American
dolls exposes the perpetuation of the notion of white women being naturally fit to be mothers,
especially in this suburban context where a family is almost a given, right alongside the white
picket fence that signals achieving the American Dream. Dolls are designed according to
normative identity characteristics privileged in the U.S., including whiteness, heteronormativity,
and being cisgender, thereby embodying and furthering intersections of power. By being created
to reflect these empowered identity features, popular, easily acquired dolls undermine the social
and cultural significance of May Ling’s Chinese heritage. By playing with white dolls, she could
internalize confusing attitudes about her identity as Chinese American. She might also develop
negative or skewed perceptions towards Chinese culture, especially in the context of Ed Lim
recalling the ‘Oriental Barbie’ depicting East Asian culture both offensively and incorrectly (Ng
263). It is useful here to consider Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s psychological experiment
known as “the doll tests” where they had white children and Black children state their
preferences for dolls identical in all characteristics except race. Their results were concerning;
most of the children preferred the white doll and the Black children had negative reactions to the
Black doll. The doctors concluded that segregation had severe impacts on Black children’s self-
esteam, and those results were used to fight segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*
(Blakemore). There is a personal relationship and sense of self reflected through dolls and other
material parts of children’s lives that must not be underestimated. Dolls also contribute to Mrs. McCullough’s conceptions of self and the widespread, though often unnoticed by its subjects, privilege of whiteness in American society. They also reflect the critical role of material things in legitimating what should be a natural relationship beyond capitalism.

White maternity and neoliberal multiculturalism intersect to inform a limited understanding of culture and, in this case, what it means for white parents to raise a Chinese American child. Bebe would be able to raise May Ling with her birth culture, connecting her to her heritage and identity in ways inaccessible to the McCulloughs. Concerns central to transracial adoptions include parents of a different race and ethnicity being equipped to help their child develop healthy connections and understanding to their identity. Numerous scholars show that both proponents and adversaries of transracial adoption agree that it should be a last resort. Additionally, they agree that white adoptive parents need to acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills to help children develop a positive racial and ethnic identity and the ability to navigate through a society preoccupied with race and ethnicity (Barn 1275).

Mrs. McCullough is portrayed empathetically as a loving caregiver for May Ling, but is troublingly and undeniably uneducated on race, ethnicity, and how those characteristics operate to form identity. These areas are critical to understand if she is to raise a Chinese American child in a country so concerned with race and ethnicity. Her ignorance is, however, unsurprising considering problematic positions white women have taken through history to further their own access to economic, legal, and social power. From their active role in slavery to efforts behind raising Confederate monuments to voting in the majority for Donald Trump in the 2016

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presidential election,9 white women have shown allegiance to ideologies that benefit them to the detriment marginalized identities. White women are, of course, disempowered on the basis of gender and sex, and are subject to dominant ideologies in ways that can be deeply harmful and concerning, such as with homeland maternity and being made to believe value is directly tied to maternity.10 Ultimately, though, white women are afforded far more power and privilege than women of color or Black women, and it is important to recognize the impact of whiteness on identity and social position. In the 10 months of having her, the McCulloughs have already started to disconnect May Ling from her cultural roots.

A clear way in which the McCulloughs disregard May Ling’s heritage is that they changed her name from May Ling to Mirabelle, despite her being named when found. The first night May Ling spent with the McCulloughs, the couple flipped through a baby name book until they found the perfect one to give her, replacing ‘May Ling’ with a “new name to celebrate the start of her new life” (Ng 115). Until Izzy asks at May Ling’s first birthday party, the McCulloughs had not had any qualms about changing the baby’s given name. May Ling is a Chinese name that means “beautiful and delicate” while Mirabelle is a French name meaning “wonderful beauty”. The ease with which the McCulloughs change the name reflects their limited understanding of culture. Renaming May Ling carries colonial and imperialist tones, especially because the two names mean essentially the same thing. The primary difference is that May Ling overtly connects to East Asian culture while Mirabelle evokes Eurocentrism.

Renaming the child is another method of disconnecting her from her birth culture while

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10 White feminism identifies the political and social ideologies where ‘feminism’ centers white narratives rather than recognizing the intersections of race, class, and other identity characteristics that create markedly different experiences for women across those identities.
indoctrinating her into dominant conceptions of American national identity, that is, one rooted in white supremacy.

Continuing in this linguistic vein, May Ling would also be effectively severed from her cultural language. Ed Lim inquires as to whether or not the McCulloughs speak any Chinese dialects, and Mrs. McCullough admits they do not (Ng 260). In *Bilingual Brokers: Race, Literature, and Language as Human Capital*, the author notes that can language act as a form of racial and cultural erasure. For example, if a person of color speaks English, they are more able to blend into the dominant cultural expectations. The universal subject does not have to be white if they demonstrate alignment with nationalist views and the unofficial official language of the state (Lim 69). This argument is expanded on through the examination of Congressional Hearings about bilingual education, where the case for bilingualism became appealing when represented as a source of human capital, an economic asset that would maximize productivity (Lim 73-4). Language is yet another site seized in order to control the culture and being of a racialized subject. Perhaps if May Ling had been raised as Mirabelle, her adoptive parents would have had her learn a Chinese dialect; however, that bilingualism would likely have been conceived as an economic asset rather than a cultural connection built through lived language and heritage. The state does not consider the presumptive loss of May Ling’s birth language nor the potential for her to have and share that language with her mother as a strong enough case for maintaining the biological parent-child bond. Furthermore, this point shows the McCulloughs do not, in fact, have every resource at their disposal to raise May Ling in the best way for her. Rather, the couple has every characteristic aligning with state interests in empowering wealth, whiteness, and consumption to the detriment of lived, shared culture.
While more recent scholarship and shared experiences warn about the complexity of transracial adoption, the process has also been regarded as a method to ending racism. One such example is present in an insightful scholarly work by Mark Jerng titled *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging* (2010). In his investigation on transracial adoption, Jerng discusses Pearl S. Buck, an American author known for her writing on life in China and for winning both the Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize for Literature. Her advocacy work for race and gender equality is well-documented, as are her efforts to further transracial and international adoption. Buck was an active proponent of the belief that transracial adoption could contribute to a color-blind world. In a criticism of this benevolent racism, Christina Klein asserts that Buck viewed mixed-race families as a means to “overcoming the ingrained racism that so threatened U.S. foreign policy goals in Asia,” further writing that “for Buck, the white mother to the non-white child became the emblem of antiracist commitment and the vehicle for achieving racial harmony on a global scale” (Jerng 126). The white mother is cast as a savior, a respected figure that will ensure national security and the well-being of the adopted children through transracial and transnational adoption. Buck’s logic was that transracial adoption would meld American ideals and international relations together, in turn paving the way for a globalized capitalist economy. These points highlight the issues of neoliberal multiculturalism and homeland maternity at the heart of the custody battle. Mrs. McCullough and Bebe are set against one another, and in exposing how and why the state is aligned with Mrs. McCullough having the legal right to be May Ling’s mother.

Mrs. McCullough says she wants May Ling to grow up to be “a typical American girl…exactly the same as everyone else” (Ng 153). This desire is well-intended but ultimately harmful for May Ling, and for many children of color adopted by white parents. Scholarship,
memoirs, and other work consistently demonstrates lasting effects on children whose parents do not adequately teach them about and help develop a positive racial and ethnic identity (Lee, 2003; Grice, 2005; Barn, 2013; Chung, 2018; Demby and Meraji, 2018). Mrs. McCullough reveals herself to be unequipped, at least at this juncture, to raise May Ling in a culturally and racially aware home. Despite the potential harm that could come from transracial adoption, the state still denies Bebe rights to her child. Through the ideological construction of white women as naturalized mothers and the positioning of white women as leading consumers, Mrs. McCullough adopting a Chinese American child exemplifies and contributes to the goals of neoliberal multiculturalism. The relationship between race, culture, and capitalism acted out in this system claims multiculturalism to be central to neoliberalism, which in turn is imperative to achieving a color-blind, equal opportunity world (“Reading Tehran in Lolita” 78). These ideologies are disingenuous as this socioeconomic system instead acts to commodify culture, contribute to the free market, and make no systemic changes to disenfranchised groups. Rather than have a system that encourages Bebe, an immigrant woman of color, to join the U.S. in a true stride for national equity, diversity, and inclusion, the state wants her Chinese American child to be raised by a white, wealthy family so she can grow up to enact national interests of consumerism within a neoliberal multicultural framework.

The state’s alignment with Mrs. McCullough being May Ling’s legal mother can be attributed to the dominant interest in maintaining neoliberal multiculturalism to enhance the U.S. as a global economic competitor and self-proclaimed leader of progressive ideals. These claims are not true or enacted in this system; the neoliberal version of multiculturalism is more interested in “a cosmopolitan market actor who can compete effectively across state boundaries” (Kymlicka 110). Transracial and international adoption contributes to this goal by indoctrinating
children of color into the ideologies guiding neoliberal multiculturalism—that is, culture via consumption and a shared national identity based on materialism. White women have been and continue to be situated as playing critical roles in upholding dominant ideologies in the U.S., particularly white supremacy and capitalism. Advocates for developing countries have argued that international adoption is a new form of colonialism and cultural imperialism that treats children as economic commodities (Tessler, Gamache, and Liu, 1999). As Little Fires Everywhere shows how May Ling’s culture is stripped from her, from being renamed to being raised by parents who want her to be a ‘typical American girl’ whatever that means, to having her culture reduced to food and art and potentially not knowing her birth language, colonization and imperialism are both in operation as she is taken under the care of two loving but ignorant adults. Jerng challenges the previously discussed argument suggesting transracial adoption could transcend race and ethnic differences on a global scale, arguing these beliefs “naturalized the figure of the adoptee in ways that managed histories of orientalism and imperialism abroad and racism at home from which adoptees emerged” (127). The color-blind, materially oriented tenets of neoliberal multiculturalism are again on display as the state favors Mrs. McCullough to be mother over Bebe.

Repressive state ideological apparatuses operate in tandem with ideological state apparatuses as institutions acting to maintain the status quo. Repressive state apparatuses are state-sponsored entities empowered to use overt force and tactics to ostensibly keep order. The police and the courts are examples of repressive state apparatuses and operate in Little Fires Everywhere to uphold Mrs. McCullough’s right to maternity. Bebe is stripped of any right to her child, denied her biological rights as a mother in the state courts. As Mr. McCullough said upon her first attempt to reclaim May Ling as her child, Bebe “has no right to be here,” a statement
evoking racist, anti-immigrant rhetoric that demands racialized, foreign subjects “go back”.

His identification of her rights, or lack thereof, is backed by officers of the state and in turn identifies his power to exclude Bebe from certain spaces. In their socially, state-sponsored position of power, the McCulloughs’ whiteness and higher socioeconomic class will be prioritized by state officers, especially when a white woman and “her” child are under apparent attack. The fact that May Ling is Bebe’s biological child holds no influence. If Ed Lim did not agree to represent Bebe pro bono, she would not have been able to afford a lawyer to help her file paperwork for visitation rights in the time leading up to the custody trial.

This systemic attack on Bebe’s maternal rights reflects the separation of children and parents of color in the U.S. One such occurrence of systemic separation through domestic adoption in the interests of white supremacist assimilation and gaining capital is the Indian Adoption Project (1958-1967). In this period, Native American children were removed from their homes and families on reservations with the intention to assimilate them into mainstream society. This program and other similar programs were soon challenged by race and ethnicity advocacy groups arguing this was racial and cultural genocide and that children would be unequipped to navigate a racist society (Lee 2003). A contemporary and similarly disturbing iteration of forced separation of parents and children is the “zero tolerance” immigration policy enacted by U.S. President Donald Trump that stipulates people illegally crossing the U.S. border will be subject to federally criminal prosecution, resulting in parents and children being separated. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, about 5,500 children were separated from their migrant parents between April 2018 and October 2019. They were detained in

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unhealthy, dangerous, inhumane conditions, often for months at a time. While thousands of parents and children have been reunited, others continue to be separated for various reasons. An Associated Press investigation used court documents, immigration records and interviews in the U.S. and Central America to show that there are loopholes in the system that allow state court judges to grant custody of migrant children to American families — without notifying their parents (Burke and Mendoza 2018). Mrs. McCullough and Bebe fighting for custody in *Little Fires Everywhere* is a microcosm of larger issues, issues that reflect the lengths the state will go in order to maintain dominant ideologies. According to a 2018 *New York Times* article, immigration to the U.S. has been decreasing, but anxiety about race and ethnicity disrupting social hierarchies and economic stability renders this fact moot (Qiu). Once again, the status quo dictates not that the economic and welfare systems are studied, critiqued and changed to achieve livable conditions for all, as the proclaimed wealthiest country in the world should be able to do if it desired, but that fear-mongering should lead to the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of racialized subjects, especially people immigrating to the country. The structure of neoliberal multiculturalism is threatened by an influx of people who are likely to maintain their cultural roots; it is far more effective to the enterprise to leverage the naturalized "rights" white women have to maternity to secure the border by breaking the parent-child connection and then, when possible, have white parents adopt children of different racial and ethnic identities.

As shown through the reading of *Little Fires Everywhere* and historical and contemporary actions, the state has a vested interest in capital and commodified diversity in order to strengthen its economic global power and national identity. Though the country claims

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to move away from racism through multiculturalism, the neoliberal brand of multiculturalism only serves to reduce culture to material exchange. Transracial adoption furthers this enterprise. Mrs. McCullough and her husband spend tens of thousands of dollars trying to track down Bebe and May Ling after Bebe takes her daughter and flees to China. They are ultimately unsuccessful, but once again demonstrate how far wealth can reach and how entitled white privilege can make one feel; there is no sense that Mrs. McCullough believes Bebe deserves to be a mother to May Ling and that she, Mrs. McCullough, may not have been the right choice due to her lack of knowledge about race and ethnicity.

A year later, Mrs. McCullough tells Mrs. Richardson that they are looking to adopt again, this time for an orphaned child with no parents to return and threaten Mrs. McCullough’s chance at being a mother. A thought that haunts Mrs. McCullough is that for all the love and care and food and toys she gave May Ling, the baby did not cry when Bebe took her out of the crib. The American legal system determined that Mrs. McCullough deserved maternity more than Bebe, but this ending suggests that essential biological connection to be more powerful after all as May Ling recognizes Bebe’s arms as “a safe place, a place she belonged” (Ng 331). While the reunion of Bebe and May Ling served as a sort of triumph, Little Fires Everywhere does not act out any systemic changes.

The custody battle revealed troubling, harmful views of those white, socioeconomically successful Shaker Heights residents, grown from the nation’s ideologies and ultimately enduring as though nothing happened. White maternity will continue to be empowered, transracial adoption will be permitted, even encouraged, in order to empower neoliberal multiculturalism, and another Chinese American baby will, we can assume, be severed from their cultural heritage, learning it instead through the consumptive understanding of culture the McCulloughs embody.
Bebe’s unlawful act upturned a single instance of injustice, but it did nothing systemically to change how maternity is conceived and controlled, how culture is commodified, or how suburbs and the nation at large force people out of spaces when they do not abide by dominant ideologies. Neoliberal multiculturalism tries to create a veneer of racial and ethnic inclusion but when that façade is threatened, those marginalized subjects are excluded. The exclusion is based on a more subtle but still threatening iteration of racism as racialized subjects are forced to adapt to the demands of the materialistic American culture in order to operate in an enclave of nationality such as Shaker Heights. Battles are waged against parent-child separation, advocates push for equal rights on national and international scales, and the shapes of problems are identified through important and useful research. Nevertheless, the system at its core remains the same. *Little Fires Everywhere* leaves one pondering what can be done to change the systems that forced Bebe to give up her child, kept her from May Ling, and enables Mrs. McCullough to adopt another Chinese baby.

The *Little Fires Everywhere* Hulu series is an exciting extension and additional text to read in tandem with the novel. Television is an even more consumption-based platform than novels, making it rife with potential for missteps and poor choices to be made in the making of shows, especially literary adaptations. One such example is *The Handmaid’s Tale*, originally written by Margaret Atwood in 1985 and adapted for television in 2017, also by Hulu. While in the novel, Black people and people of color were banished to the dangerous and distant Colonies, away from the dominant space of Gilead, the show was criticized for mismanaging its portrayal and management of race. The show opts for a post-racial approach to Gilead, depicting a hyper-misogynistic society that has moved beyond racism. If Hulu had stayed true to Atwood’s novel, the show likely would have been criticized for not casting Black actors or actors of color. It
would have been criticized for being whitewashed; now, it is criticized for pretending race has been socially transcended in both the present shown through flashbacks and the future dystopic Gilead (Berlatsky; Mathias; McDonald). In contrast, the *Little Fires Everywhere* Hulu adaptation effectively displays racism, white feminism, and a critical stance against the attitude that a color-blind approach to race is effective.

The color-blind attitude toward race is emblematic of the Clinton era approaches to race in America that discouraged antiracist conversations and critique about national racism even as the administration passed distinctly racist policies and offers potential for an effective reading of the post-racial attitudes signature to the 1990s and how those attitudes function contemporarily.\(^{13}\) This paper does not offer a reading of Mrs. Richardson and Mia Warren, but the two women are the main characters in *Little Fires Everywhere*, contrast in similar ways as Mrs. McCullough and Bebe. In the novel, Mia and Pearl’s race is not explicitly stated. In the television adaptation, they are Black, and their experiences reflect racism in the U.S. The extended parallels between Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. McCullough as white, middle- to upper-class married women that grew up in suburban American compared to Mia and Bebe as women of color and single, working-class mothers are brought to life on-screen and offer opportunity to explore the social structures around these identities. The intersections of discrimination are central to the show’s emotional power, made even more prominent in its intentional decision to further align Mia with Bebe.

Pearl, Mia’s teenaged daughter, experiences pain at various moments thanks to the oblivious racism, informed by a color-blind ethic, of the various Richardson family members. By centering

\(^{13}\) Two pieces of legislation for which the Clinton administration is most known includes Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. These laws affected Black communities, communities of color, and poor communities at disproportionate rates, inflating the national sense of ‘personal responsibility’ and eroding systems of reparation, equity, and welfare.
race even more intentionally than the novel, the Hulu adaptation offers a multitude of potential critiques and readings.

Another way in which the Hulu series opens further sites of conversation around identity and power in the U.S. is through its extended interest in and depiction of different character’s gender and sexuality identities. In the novel, Mia’s gender identity is ambiguous. Pearl was conceived through artificial insemination, and it is implied Mia never had personal romantic relationships after giving birth. In the series, however, Mia is depicted as having a relationship with her professor and mentor Pauline Hawthorne as well as having sexual relations with men, complicating her sexual identity. Furthermore, Izzy’s sexuality is not discussed in the novel, but is a central storyline for the character in the Hulu series. Izzy has a secret relationship with her friend, April, but April turns on her and Izzy’s classmates begin bullying her at school for being a lesbian, offering further context for Izzy’s angst and rebellion throughout Little Fires Everywhere. Normative ideologies about gender and sexuality are also central to the intersections of neoliberal multiculturalism and homeland maternity. Through commodities like dolls, there is an active market for material goods that uphold gender and sexuality norms and stereotypes. Sexuality is often reduced to rainbow-emblazoned commodities as companies clamor to appeal to the LGBTQIA+ market, reflecting the neoliberal multicultural system at work in the U.S. The Hulu series centers sexual identities, providing space for extended analyses of these characters and how their experiences reflect and expose problematic national systems.

Little Fires Everywhere acts as a site that usefully provokes moments of reflection and reveals problematic systems. White maternity as an ideological state apparatus can be applied and explored in many directions; this work can be viewed as a success for its critique of whiteness and neoliberalism done in a manner that also draws a wide audience. It also
demonstrates the inevitably tragic ending when dominant, oppressive systems do not change. Mia and Bebe, the subjects in Shaker Heights that do not adhere to ruling ideologies, are expelled from the suburb. Bebe has to break the law to get her baby and leave the country altogether in order to escape the power and reach of white maternity. Every power structure demonstrated is upheld, leaving work to be done to continue seeking an understanding of and solutions to such issues.
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