Traversing the boundaries of the New Momism:

Challenging the “good” mother myth in

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017 –) and *Big Little Lies* (2017 –)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the conflicting and polarising nature of contemporary motherhood, whereby tactics of surveillance and monitoring generate internalised anxieties surrounding the achievement of “good” motherhood. Through a textual analysis framework, this thesis examines the capacity for televisual texts to intervene in and provide a commentary on, the cultural conversations surrounding the regulation of mothering practices and the kinds of subjectivities women can inhabit in 21st century America.

The heightened politicisation of women’s bodies in the United States and its intersecting relationship with motherhood is examined through Hulu’s The Handmaid’s Tale (2017 –) and HBO’s Big Little Lies (2017 –). Although the texts are generically very different, with one being a dystopian drama and the other a realistic suburban “whodunnit”, I argue that both texts represent a complex engagement with the central female characters who come to understand their selves within, and outside of, their role as mothers. I also examine the characters’ everyday feminine entanglements with violence and trauma that invoke a collective act of consciousness raising between the female characters as well as from the audience.

In my analysis of both texts, I draw extensively on Adrienne Rich’s (1976) definition of motherhood as a patriarchal institution, its potentially empowering qualities and the dichotomy of motherhood as a site of both love and anger, as well as Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels’ (2005) theory of “The New Momism” and the postfeminist trope of “having it all”. I argue that the changing landscape of production, access and distribution, allows for television to re-orient the male gaze, challenge dominant, limiting narratives about motherhood as well as providing a platform for female characters to “speak back to” traditional representations of women, and their role as mothers on screen.
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Introduction

Contemporary motherhood is a site of intense and unrelenting conflict, it is where love and anger can coexist and women can feel simultaneously empowered and oppressed. Motherhood is also a site of surveillance. It is where women watch and scrutinise ourselves and more importantly, we watch and monitor each other. Using an informal scoresheet, mothers are judged on the postfeminist responsibility of “having-it-all”: the home, the body, the family and, in some circumstances, the career. The plethora of mothering manuals, how-to-guides and blogging sites dedicated to fit mums, thrifty mums, stay-at-home mums and the latest neologism, “mumpreneurs”¹, contributes to an environment in which motherhood is constantly displayed, critiqued and also, commodified.

Emerging from this environment are two televisual texts at the centre of my analysis: Hulu’s dystopian, theocratic and totalitarian world of The Handmaid’s Tale (2017 –) and HBO’s Big Little Lies (2017 –), a suburban, sea-side drama underscored by a “whodunnit” narrative, that explores the interrelated lives of five women, all representing various tropes of contemporary mothering. Through a textual analysis framework, this thesis will explore the shared experiences of motherhood as a site of conflict, as well as unpacking the dramatisation of intersecting feminist issues such as intra-familial violence, the politicisation of women’s bodies as a cause for national concern, as well as female autonomy and access in the public sphere. This thesis argues that both The Handmaid’s Tale and Big Little Lies allow for their female characters to challenge and “speak back to” the oppressive institution of motherhood (Rich, 1976) while also conforming to the regulatory practices of the New Momism, in order to demonstrate how “bad” or “good enough” mothering can in fact, be empowering.

¹ A woman who combines running her business with the additional care of her children. A portmanteau of “mum” and “entrepreneur”.
While both texts are adaptations of novels of the same name, penned by Margaret Atwood (1985) and Liane Moriarty (2014) respectively, I acknowledge that this thesis will not be focused on adaptation theory. However, the original novels and the female authors themselves, play a significant role in crafting texts that project complex and authentic representations of the contemporary mothering experience. I have chosen to orient this thesis through a textual analysis framework that engages with both a comparative and critical lens, in order to integrate a discussion of two texts with different genres, structure and thematic techniques, whilst still applying contextually relevant arguments about the climate in which they are produced. By analysing transgressive and critical responses to the institution of motherhood and the inherent practices of monitoring and self-surveillance, these texts can be seen to respond to current socio-political anxieties about female sexual autonomy, “good” mothering behaviours and the re-domestication of women.

Across the fields of cultural, film, literary and feminist studies, motherhood has been a constant site of critique and analysis. Revived time and time again to respond to changes in mothering trends and expectations, the endurance of motherhood as a site of investigation both within and outside of academia, is a testament to the inter-workings of motherhood with the socio-political contexts that frame it. As Olivia Guaraldo (2016: 131) suggests, ‘whenever women’s role in society has undergone major changes, a stricter control over motherhood in general has been observed, as if motherhood remained the sole stable and firm institution able to grant society and humanity their continuation’. As a result, analysing transgressive representations of motherhood in television becomes a way of understanding the developments of women’s roles in both the public and private spheres.
Through a similar lens to Elspeth Probyn’s analysis, ‘New traditionalism and post-feminism: TV does the Home’, this thesis views television not simply as entertainment but as a way to ‘focus upon the changing social climate which we live and watch’ (Probyn, 1990: 159). Probyn (1990: 158) states, ‘the prime-time discourses of the family or of the home or of women are affective precisely because they lodge in the real…they draw actual women to conversations about families and homes’. As I will demonstrate, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Big Little Lies* have generated and continue to encourage, immersive conversations about the role of women and motherhood at play. Further work in this area includes Laura Tropp’s (2004), Elizabeth Podnieks’ (2012) and Latham Hunter’s (2012) analyses of the “choice” narrative of postfeminism, the “time crisis” anxiety surrounding women’s bodies (Negra, 2008) and the complex inter-workings of motherhood, femininity and the neoliberal citizen, as demonstrated through the popular, primetime series *Sex and the City* (1998 - 2004), *Gilmore Girls* (2000 - 2007) and *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005 -) respectively. Drawing on the aforementioned themes, this thesis responds to, and is situated amongst, a body of work examining televisual texts and their relationship to non-normative or challenging images of contemporary motherhood.

**Theoretical engagement with postfeminism**

I will begin by critically engaging with the key theoretical framing of “postfeminism”, in order to make sense of its interweaving narrative with motherhood and continuing relevance and application in critical analysis today. Rosalind Gill (2016: 613), regarded as one of the most significant theoretical contributors to the study of postfeminism, defines it as:

> a critical analytical term that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life, which include the emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency as dominant modes of accounting…the “deterritorialisation” of patriarchal power and its “reterritorialization” in women’s bodies and the beauty-industrial complex [and] the intensification and extensification of forms of surveillance, monitoring, and
Despite this definition, postfeminism still remains an elusive concept. In applying it extensively throughout this thesis, postfeminism will be used to describe the intense policing of women’s bodies as disseminated by mass media and perpetuated by a “choice” mechanism, that encourages constant critique of oneself and other women. Furthermore, as McRobbie (2004: 255) suggests, postfeminism involves a ‘double entanglement with feminism’ whereby, it ‘positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account’, whilst simultaneously contributing to the ‘undoing of feminism’ (Gill, 2016: 613, original emphasis).

I will use the “double entanglement” of postfeminism as a way to understand the conflicting nature of contemporary motherhood as represented in both texts. At times, this analysis will also critique some of the longstanding tropes and assumptions about postfeminism and television. As I will later discuss, the first chapter will use a comparative lens to assess the role of both texts in critiquing the post-feminist trope of women “having it all”. In the latter two chapters of this thesis, I will demonstrate how the female characters in *Big Little Lies* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* respectively, grapple with the complex opportunity of choice in both the private and public spheres and how it shapes the formation of their identities both within and outside of, their roles as mothers.

**The New Momism**
One of the key pillars of postfeminism is the rhetoric of choice, ‘a watchword repeatedly used to underscore the neoliberal fantasy that “anything can be achieved” if the right choices and “correct disposition has been adopted”’ (Gill, 2016: 624). As such, this choice culture involves an inherent focus on individual responsibility and personal transformation rather than on combating systemic inequality and structural issues. This choice narrative is especially pertinent to Douglas and Michaels’ (2005: 4) theory of the “New Momism”; that is:
the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being 24/7 to her children.

The ferocity through which women are required to dedicate their self to motherhood means that any decision to spend time away from their children, whether it be through a career or self-care, brings with it an intense scrutiny. The feminist insistence that women have choices, ‘that they are active agents in control of their destiny, that they have autonomy’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 5) is central to the New Momism, contributing to the highly gendered illusion of women being able to “have it all”. As the contradictory nature of the New Momism would attest, work and motherhood are polarising forces that cannot seamlessly coordinate therefore, ‘both working mothers and stay-at-home mothers get to be failures’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 12, original emphasis). Sitting amongst these everyday practices of monitoring and self-surveillance is the role of television in disseminating and challenging ideology. Although the promotion of ideology cannot be attributed solely to the passive viewership of television audiences, Amanda Lotz (2009: 51) suggests that ‘conventional practices of looking might be considered to encompass all of the day-to-day behaviours and norms that have come to organise our interactions with television’. Thus, indicating how through constant observation, television can reaffirm certain ideals, norms and behaviours about what it means to be for example, a “good” mother.

While the New Momism can be seen to be one of the most central, justifying ideologies of postfeminism, neoliberalism acts alongside this, working to inform the responsibility of the citizen and the stepping back of the government as a result of the free market thereby, influencing policy decisions surrounding welfare, reproduction and female sexual autonomy.
A cornerstone of neoliberal thinking is the idea that the individual is constructed as an enterprise, constantly made and encouraged to better themselves. As Garrett et al. (2016: x) suggest, ‘the individualistic conception of selfhood central to neoliberalism accepts that an individual is both an ideal locus of sovereignty and a site of government intervention’.

It is through the control and regulation of the family structure, through the tightening of welfare reforms and the simultaneous positioning of the family as at the crux of modern society, that it inhabits a conflicting dichotomy as both ‘queen and prisoner of the social world’ (Garrett et al., 2016: xii). I will be explicitly focusing on the role of neoliberalism in the latter two chapters of my thesis, where my analysis of the family as a key site of bio-political power will be integrated with a critique of the contemporary surveillance society, where the realism of *Big Little Lies*’ Monterey will be juxtaposed to the dystopian nightmare of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s Gilead.

**Critiquing televisual texts**  
From a critical perspective, the medium of television provides a bridge between the public and private spheres by bringing both current events and fictional texts into the domestic arena. As such, television can be seen to simultaneously personify and engage with the core feminist ideology that asserts “the personal is political”. John Hartley (1999, qtd in Brady et al. 2017: 4, original emphasis) argues ‘television was invented not as a “mass” medium, but as a *domestic* one’, as television has been instrumental in shaping the norms of national domestic life. While other mediums such as film could be used to further examine the global and cross-cultural impact on the representations of motherhood, I have chosen to focus on television in the United States (U.S.) in order to respond to the formative location and socio-political context of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Big Little Lies*. 
As a cultural form, television has evolved into what Amanda Lotz (2009: 50) coins as the ‘post-network era’ that is, a new phase of television that is contrasted to the restrictive, “network era” in which television followed a linear schedule and was controlled by the three-major networks in the U.S. Coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism and the weakening of the welfare state in favour of self-surveillance and individual monitoring, the network era of television began to dissipate in the 1980s to make way for new control and recording devices that transformed the viewing experience of television from a collective experience, to individually determined and available on demand at any time.

Through the creation of portable devices, television has expanded outside of the living room, allowing for audiences to interweave their viewing experience around every aspect of their lives. As Lotz suggests, ‘the erosion of the family audience reinforced the rise of programming directed to increasingly niche tastes that cable made available’ (2009: 57). Lotz asserts that the network era allowed for viewing of programmes to be a ‘shared cultural experience’ (2009: 52) with broad, universal themes in order to appease the wider family audience which has now been disbanded by programming strategies developed to meet the needs of individual viewers. However, the introduction of new recording devices transformed the capabilities of television to be recorded, saved and re-watched at the viewers request. The expansion of cable networks, such as *The Handmaid's Tale’s* HBO (Home Box Office) and the rise of streaming services such as *Big Little Lies*’ Hulu,\(^2\) have resulted in a more curated direction of content ‘more narrowly targeted so that the audience at any one moment is often more accurately theorised as a collection of niches rather than as a mass’ (Lotz, 2004: 424).

\(^2\) “Hulu” is derived from two Mandarin Chinese words, which both translate to ‘holder of precious things’ and ‘interactive recording’
Through streaming services, the ‘subscription model attracts and maintains subscribers to the service rather than capturing viewers in a specific time period’ (Brady et al. 2017: 6) thereby allowing viewers to engage in seamless episode delivery without the interruption of advertisements, allowing for the consumption of an entire season or series all at once through “binge-watching”. By eliminating the direct control of advertisers, ‘who have often served as gatekeepers of programming and scheduling’ (Brady et al., 2017: 6), the needs and interests of the audience are prioritised. As a result, audiences are given greater incentives to become personally invested in the shows they are consuming, while also enabling different stories to be told that limit the effect and interference of production. Furthermore, through the immediate access and availability of downloadable content across smart phones, tablets and portable computer devices, viewers are able to ‘both space-shift and time-shift [marking] a significant break from the ideological configurations of the suburban “family circle” or “electronic hearth”’ (Brady et al., 2017: 8). Despite these new configurations and the evolution of television outside of the domestic sphere, Brady et al. (2017: 8) argues that the ‘ideological and cultural significance of television in framing the everyday persists’.

**Commentary on the socio-political climate**

As I have already mentioned, television does not simply act as a mirror to everyday culture nor is it always a form of passive entertainment. My analysis of television focuses on the political and social context in which both texts have emerged, in order to demonstrate how these texts have significant cultural value. The first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Big Little Lies* were both released in 2017, a year of significant political turmoil in the U.S. and other Western nations with the rise of populist ethno-nationalism and conservative right-wing ideologies. In turn, a growing anxiety has seeped into the collective societal consciousness, imparted upon minorities and women in a vicious manner where progress and equal rights distribution has stumbled to an abrupt halt. Legislative changes in the U.S are a constant threat to female bodily
and sexual autonomy where women’s biological “imperative” to reproduce is positioned as an issue of national consequence.

As I will explain below, the context framing these two texts has ushered in an increased politicisation of women’s bodies and their role as mothers. The heightened anxieties surrounding women’s rights is dramatised in *The Handmaid’s Tale* through the dystopian setting, where the decaying world comes to mirror the physical and symbolic assault carried out upon the female body. Comparatively, *Big Little Lies* projects the current anxieties of the New Momism onto the female characters in order to demonstrate how the patriarchal institution of motherhood seeps into the everyday subconscious. I will make explicit reference to the importance of context in framing *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the third chapter of analysis and also touch upon the reciprocity between context, production and audience in the concluding chapter.

In the United States, women’s bodies are an enduring target and perennial feature of the political battleground. In recent headlines, the words “assault”³, “global death warrant”⁴ and “ferocious attack”⁵ have all appeared, contributing to a lexical chain in which women’s bodies and their sexual and reproductive freedoms are under constant threat. The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) released their 2018 report on the political and legal status of women’s reproductive rights in the United States. In this issue, it was revealed that nationwide, the United States have “restricted access” to reproductive healthcare (NARAL, 2018) and although this has been stagnant prior to Trump’s election, it was only days after his inauguration that President Trump reinstated the Mexico City Policy, commonly

³ Gottbrath, 2018. ‘One year under Trump: ‘An assault on women’s health’” *Aljazeera.com*
⁴ Boseley, 2017. ‘How Trump signed a global death warrant for women’ *Theguardian.com*
⁵ Georgiou, 2018. ‘Trump abortion gag rule is a ‘ferocious attack’ on women’s rights, experts warn’ *Newsweek.com*
known as the “Global Gag Rule” (GGR). This policy ‘places limits on US funding distribution by excluding overseas NGOS that perform or promote abortion and related services, such as public information campaigns and lobbying’ (Tanyag, 2017).

Stripping away the support, access and education for these facilities creates an environment of animosity and a sense of helplessness for both the person seeking treatment and/or knowledge, and for those providing it. As NARAL’s President Ilyse G. Hogue states in the opening address of the 2018 report, on top of the more than 400 anti-abortion bills introduced in 2017 and significant advancements on these bills by Congress, ‘Donald Trump put an anti-choice justice on the Supreme Court while stacking our nation’s lower courts with right-wing ideologues who will reshape the country in Trump’s image for generations to come’ (NARAL, 2018). Mis-education and media scare-tactics have all contributed to an environment in which abortion rights, reproductive access and women’s sexual autonomy are shrouded under a veil of political control. As one of the only developed countries without universal health care, no guaranteed paid maternity leave, and grossly unaffordable child care⁶, the United States posits a complex climate of instability, where women are simultaneously encouraged to become mothers and criticised for their decision, or inability, to perform outside of this regulatory framework.

**Introducing The Handmaid’s Tale (2017 –) and Big Little Lies (2017 –)**
In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the bleak dystopia of the not-too-distant Gilead is so disruptive *because* it is fictional realism, everything that occurs, from the stripping of female land and

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⁶ Although this is a contentious issue in Australia as well, the United States’ complete lack of reassurance for women to become mother’s and maintain a working career is reflective of their nationwide level of “restrictive access” to reproductive healthcare.
economic ownership, enforced surrogacy, female genital mutilation, “marital” rape and of course, the criminalisation of abortion, have all happened in the past or continue to occur unknowingly. The enduring feminist struggles experienced in the 1985 novel and then adapted and altered for the screen, are indicative of the continuing need for feminism, as the ’female anxieties associated with fertility, procreation, and maternity are projected as feminist nightmare and cultural catastrophe’ (Rubenstein, 1988: 102).

After an astronomical spike in infertility rates as a result of environmental pollution and sexually transmitted diseases, the leaders of Gilead construct a highly militarised and hierarchical regime in which fertile women are forced to reproduce for the elite Commanders and their Wives. Known as the “Handmaids”, these women are relegated to ritualised rape and every aspect of their former life, including their families, is forcibly removed. Although fictional, The Handmaid's Tale is born out of a context where women’s reproductive rights and sexual freedoms are scrutinised, presenting an ominous vision of patriarchal subjugation where women are seen as nothing more than an imperative piece in the biological puzzle.

On a markedly different note, Big Little Lies is a realistic drama series, centring on the interrelated lives of five mothers in the affluent, seaside town of Monterey. In contrast to the bleak dystopia of The Handmaid’s Tale, Big Little Lies is interspersed with elements of ironic humour and the mundanity of the Stepford-esque town, in order to make the serious issues of domestic violence, extra-marital affairs, murder and the side story addressing sex trafficking, more palatable for a networked audience. What sparked my interest in this show, is its depiction of the complex and contradictory nature of mothering ‘as a site of both power and

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7 In reference to The Stepford Wives (1975), a thriller centred on successful television producer Joanne Eberhart, who comes to suspect the submissive housewives in her new suburban neighbourhood are actually robots created by their husbands. The satirical remake also starred Nicole Kidman in 2004.
oppression…self-esteem and self-sacrifice’ (Hansen, 1997: 3). As a result, the female characters in the show are able to share with the audience their everyday experiences of trauma and anxieties surrounding their complex identities both within, and outside of, their role as mothers.

The first chapter of analysis, titled “Selves of our own to return to: complex mother identities,” draws inspiration from Adrienne Rich’s (1976: 37) statement that beyond mothering, women ‘need selves of our own to return to’, providing reassurance and solidarity in the idea that devoting ones entire being to mothering is not the most fulfilling experience of adult womanhood. Through an extensive response to Rich’s ground-breaking text Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), this chapter will respond to the “natural” equation of woman as mother, whilst examining the possibilities for empowerment through processes of confession and open dialogue that both texts employ in order to generate a didactic response from audiences. I will examine how The Handmaid’s Tale and Big Little Lies provide a counter-argument to the post-feminist narrative that women can “have it all” while also unpacking the possibility for love and anger to co-exist in the mothering experience. The first chapter will be the only one to provide an in-depth analysis of both The Handmaid’s Tale and Big Little Lies in a comparative lens, while the latter two chapters will be separated in order to honour the generic and stylistic differences of both texts.

The second chapter titled “Momism is the new black”, will draw on Douglas and Michaels’ (2005) New Momism and mommy wars, as well as Rebecca Feasey’s (2012) extrapolation of the “good” mother stereotype in order to demonstrate how the characters of Bonnie, Celeste, Madeline, Renata and Jane all come to embody the conflicting representations of contemporary motherhood. Through the narratorial techniques of flashbacks/flash-forwards and dream
sequences, the complex characterisation of these women is gradually unravelled leaving the task of determining who is the “good” mother into the hands of the audience. I will argue that all of these women are characterised as being deeply flawed, yet also extremely resilient, with a specific focus on the everyday interactions of violence and trauma as hallmarks of the collective, female experience. However, it is their struggle to come to terms with their sole identities as mothers, that allows for a transgressive depiction of the serene, docile figure of the mother commonly depicted on-screen.

Following on from this, the third chapter titled “Regulating the female body” will use a Foucauldian lens to understand how the surveillance society comes to fruition under the theocratic government of Gilead in The Handmaid’s Tale. The hierarchies of oppression that intersect with fears of infertility and the anxieties about the longevity of the nation work to denigrate all women as powerless, even those who appear to yield power over the Handmaids. The traditional values espoused in The Handmaid’s Tale connect to a re-domestication of women, whereby the home becomes the place of imprisonment and pregnancy becomes the only source of reprieve. Through the dystopian lens, the postfeminist trope of “retreatism” is heightened in the series in order to dramatise the female characters’ extreme lack of power and their reduced identities as reproductive labourers. Through an engagement with the turbulent socio-political context surrounding women’s rights, reproductive access and sexual autonomy, The Handmaid’s Tale provides a frightening insight into the very possible future whilst demonstrating how the dystopian setting reflects the symbolic violation of the female body, as enforced by the patriarchal institution of motherhood.
Chapter One: ‘Selves of our own to return to’: complex mother identities

Women are intrinsically linked to motherhood; to be “childless” or “barren” negates a sense of complete, adult womanhood. Any choice or inability to conform to such biological and societal expectations contributes to feelings of failure within women. As The Handmaid’s Tale proscribes, women who do not reproduce are branded as “unwomen”, suggesting that a woman can only be deemed whole if she conforms to her “duty” to reproduce. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how both The Handmaid’s Tale and Big Little Lies critique the essentialism that women are seen to be completed through motherhood, unpacking the assumption that ‘in the eyes of society, once having been mothers, what are we, if not always mothers?’ (Rich, 1976: 37).

As Adrienne Rich laments in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, it is through her experience of pregnancy that she was endowed with an aura of approval, as ‘I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be “like other women”’ (1976: 25). This chapter will critique the assumption that to be “like other women”, one needs to comply with the expectation to reproduce, as well as continuously upholding the image of the selfless and completely devoted, “good” mother stereotype. As I will argue below, both texts present motherhood as a double-bind: the female characters are simultaneously oppressed by their identities as mothers and empowered by the strength that mothering gives them to overcome trauma, both past and present.

Both texts call upon the audience to empathise with the complex experience of motherhood as a site of both love and anger, while also providing a social commentary on the institutional barriers that inhibit women to “have it all” and simultaneously encourages them to retreat to
the domestic sphere (Negra, 2008). Rich views motherhood as an institution, one that has endured for as long as time can remember however, it is omnipresent and intangible as ‘it cannot be touched or seen’ (Rich, 1976: 276). This institution is patriarchal in nature, enforcing an omnipotence-impotence relationship between men and women, whereby women’s bodies are controlled and regulated by men in their capacity to reproduce and sustain the nation.

The idea of men controlling women’s bodies is not a new concept; feminists have been concerned with the institutional barriers that are imposed upon women, their sexuality and their bodies for decades. However, as Rich suggests, it is precisely women’s bodies which form the ‘terrain on which patriarchy is erected’ (1976: 55) and it is the coinciding male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) that dominates popular culture reproductions of motherhood. Lisbet van Zoonen argues that ‘a core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of woman as spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience’ (qtd. In Tropp, 2006: 866). Subsequently, the image of the female body ‘invokes the male gaze’ (Tropp, 2006: 866) and encourages practices of looking. However, this is sensationalised in Gilead where the extreme coverage of the Handmaid’s bodies and the shielding of their faces by their veils forces the viewer to turn their gaze away from the subjects themselves, and onto the systemic atrocities taking place. Laura Tropp (2006: 866) suggests that amongst this patriarchal viewership and curation of the female body, the female gaze also emerges ‘as women are invited to look at their pregnant counterparts’. As I will further demonstrate in Chapter Three, practices of looking create an atmosphere in which women’s bodies are monitored and surveyed, both externally, and more importantly, by the women themselves.

The women of Monterey are charged with safeguarding their own reputation as “good” mothers, as well as constantly determining whether their neighbours are abiding by such
mothering expectations. The perpetual anxiety present in both shows inverts the camera framing from a voyeuristic lens, instead allowing the viewer to see through the eyes of the central characters. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* in particular, the use of out-of-focus, extreme close-ups of Offred’s face and other Handmaidens are interspersed throughout the series, allowing for the intense emotion and anguish experienced by these women to be received by the viewer, even if their voices are silenced. *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Big Little Lies* use visual symbolism and motifs to attract the viewers’ attention to the trauma of the female characters, and to the female experience of motherhood in general, as I will now illustrate.

**Barren bodies**
The biological equation of women as mother is reiterated in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a matter of national concern, supported through religious ideology and enforced by a patriarchal ordinance. Through the literal and symbolic hierarchisation of women, the Handmaids and Wives grapple with an illusory display of power dynamics however, both are forced to ‘become one flower’ (1. 4) in the Ceremony and are encouraged to ‘stay strong for one another’ (1. 3) through the arduous task of reproduction. The ritualised act of rape, known as “The Ceremony”, is introduced through the religious parable of Rachel and Leah, taken from the Old Testament scripture Genesis 30:1, ‘And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die’ (1.1). The Wife and Handmaid are joined in unison, hands held, as they are at one, physically and symbolically penetrated by the Commander. Later in the birthing scene of Episode 2, Ofwarren is joined from behind by her Commander’s Wife who is dressed in the same white nightgown, holding her hands as the Aunts and Handmaids encourage her to deliver the baby, collectively repeating the words ‘hold, hold, hold’ ‘exhale, exhale, exhale’ ‘breathe, breathe, breathe’ (1.2). June states that there was ‘a smell coming from that room, something primal…the smell of genesis’ (1.2) thereby
suggesting a natural bond that is shared between these women who are all tasked with being mother, life-giver and child-rearer of the Gileadean future.

While motherhood is an encroaching institution, Rich argues that mothering as an experience has the potential to be empowering. By being able to ‘choose the means of conception (biological, artificial, or parthenogenetic), the place of birth, her own style of giving birth, and her birth-attendants’ (Rich, 1976: 184) the autonomy of the mother is authenticated. Despite the obvious male absence in the birthing scene it is through the controlled nature of The Ceremony and the division of reproductive labour across the categories of each women, which work to shore up the series’ wider commentary on the institutional barriers oppressing women during motherhood. As Rich (1976: 34) states, it is

the regulation of women’s reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynaecology, and extra uterine reproduction experiments – are all essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers.

The above quotation encapsulates the all-encompassing control of the male leaders of Gilead, whereby every facet of society contributes to the oppression of women under the institution of motherhood. Although Offred’s Doctor suggests to her that ‘Waterford’s [her Commander] probably sterile, most of those guys are’ (1.4), she uses an inner-dialogue to speak back to the audience, ‘there’s no such thing as a sterile man anymore. There’s only women who are fruitful and women who are barren’ (1.4). The Gileadean assumption that men are eternal life-givers and women are the ones who determine successful reproduction, provides a critical commentary on the stigma associated with infertility and further dramatises the role of
motherhood as an institution that ‘exercises control over women as they bear and rear children to serve the interests of men’ (O’Brien Hallstein, 2010: 22).

_The Handmaid’s Tale_ strips the women of harnessing any potential power through their role as mothers by exaggerating their extreme lack of choice and sensationalising the female body as reproductive vessel. The Commanders of Gilead come to embody the logic of “Bowlbyism” that is, John Bowlby’s post-war imperative to keep mothers in the home, insisting that ‘the two-parent family was the bedrock of a stable society and any deviation should be condemned’ (Barbagallo, 2016: 11). Although feminist critics argue Bowlbyism has led to ‘instilling guilt and suffocation in a generation of mothers’ (Barbagallo, 2016: 11), Bowlby’s *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1953) has been reprinted multiple times and remained highly influential in shaping preconceptions about mothering duties, particularly in the American psyche and the extremities of Gileadean policy.

By reducing women to their biological function, _The Handmaid’s Tale_ presents Gilead as a society that is retreating not only to the domestic sphere, but more importantly, in the progress that has been made by feminist movements, policy and legislature in cementing the rights of women and their increased choices in their personal and public lives. I will now examine how the use of flashbacks in the series provides a visual contrast between the momentous gains for women’s rights throughout history and the ability for such power to be taken away in an instant, and how this has been employed in order to comment on the rapid changes to abortion access and reproductive rights for women in the United States under the Trump-Pence Government.

In Episode 3, Moira and June (Offred) are jogging together through the city streets before entering a local coffee shop. After asking if the woman who usually works there is sick, the
male server bluntly replies, ‘how would I know’. After June’s card is declined due to having insufficient funds the server calls them ‘fucking sluts’ and forces them out of the store. Later on, June finds out all of her accounts are frozen and receives no communication from banking representatives as to why this is occurring. The next scene cuts to June and her fellow female employees at work being asked to leave despite their boss stating, ‘it isn’t my decision, I didn’t have a choice’ (1.3). It’s revealed that women are prohibited from owning property, while any financial account is frozen, with the assets handed over to their husband or next male of kin. This series of flashbacks depicts the rapid loss of autonomy experienced by women who, once fiercely independent and capable of great success in the public sphere, are stripped of any self-determination and forced to rely upon their husbands and fathers in an ode to the patria potestas (paternal power) of Ancient Rome.

Comparatively, in one of the secret meetings she shares with the Commander, Offred is given a magazine, a contraband item that Waterford observes in disgust, commenting on the models, who ‘look like zoo animals, about to go extinct’ (1.5). In discussing the images of the models and the ‘10 ways to tell he’s into you’, Offred remarks that ‘we had choices then’ (1.5) and despite the sexualised, unrealistic depiction of women littered throughout such magazines, Offred suggests that to have these choices is empowering and is what “we” (feminists) have collectively fought for. The Commander retorts, ‘now you have respect, protection, you can fulfil your biological destiny in peace’ (1.5), arguing that there is ‘[nothing] else to live for’ except for children. The Handmaid’s Tale actively critiques the postfeminist rhetoric of choice while providing an ironic twist on the concept of “destiny” which Diane Negra (2008: 7) suggests, is ‘ideologically central to the contemporary chick flick’ whereby, women “discover” something about themselves that guides them along a path, often leading them to their “true love”.
When asked besides children ‘what else is there to live for?’ the camera zooms in on an extreme close-up of Offred’s lips as she utters the word ‘love’ in response (1.5). The Commander laughs at Offred, ‘love isn’t real, lust is part of a marketing campaign’, and it is in this exchange that the contemporary woman is devalued as a commodified pawn, made vulnerable again and reliant upon man in order to retreat to what is expected of her: to reproduce. However, the one thing that Offred uses as a weapon in her survival, is the unconditional love that she shares for her daughter Hannah; a love that allows her to endure such dehumanisation in the hopes that they would one day be reunited. By sharing with the audience flashbacks of her life prior to Gilead, such as a mundane trip to the aquarium (1.1), June’s connection to her life before she was Offred is preserved through memory and her identity as more than just a mother is made fully apparent.

**Self-contained borders**
While ‘the physically confining room, walls, and other actual boundaries of the Republic of Gilead corroborate the condition of reproductive “confinement” to which the handmaids are subject’ (Rubenstein, 1988: 103), the sea-side town of Monterey in *Big Little Lies*, acts as an imperceptible border that heightens and sensationalises anxieties about successful mothering practices. As outlined in the introduction, mainstream media’s dissemination of the good mother myth enforces an idealisation of successful mothering through the repetition of certain behaviours and images, such as the docile, self-sacrificing, stay-at-home mother. The regulation of “good” and “bad” mothering practices will be analysed in more detail in Chapter Two. However, I will use the remainder of this chapter to explore the dichotomy of mothering as a source of both love and anger, where feelings of shame, guilt and a lack of fulfilment can coexist in a woman’s search for her identity outside of motherhood. To preface this, I will examine the significance of the visual symbolism in *Big Little Lies* through the recurring motif
of the ocean which acts as a metaphor for both the inner turmoil experienced by the female characters, as well as the possibility for renewal through confession.

The dualistic symbolism of water is introduced in the title sequence for the show by contrasting images of waves crashing dangerously against rocks and then creeping slowly up the sand, while sensual, feminine imagery is interspersed to symbolise the ocean as a sign of power, death and claustrophobia, but also as a source of life, rebirth and fertility. Madeline, whose home backs onto the sandy shores, remarks to her younger daughter Chloe, ‘the ocean is powerful, but mostly it is vast. It’s full of life and mystery. Who knows what lies out there beneath the surface’ (1.2). As she stares longingly from the comfort of her kitchen window, Madeline further states, ‘it’s the great unknown, that’s what the ocean is’ (1.2). This languorous aside works to dramatise the repressed anxieties of the five women, who each hold intense secrets that are gradually unravelled throughout the course of the season, while also reflecting the significance of the ocean as a recurring visual motif mirroring the characters’ emotions.

In particular, Jane is shown on multiple occasions running along the sand and entering the water in a dream-like flashback after she was raped. These scenes always occur when the light of the morning is starting to appear however, the moon is always present. The moon’s influence over the ocean tides, causing the water to recede and then trace the shore, acts as a mirror to not only the female menstrual cycle, but also, of Jane’s experience in regaining her sexuality after both rape and childbirth. As Rich (1976: 108) corroborates,

the ocean whose tides respond, like woman’s menses, to the pull of the moon, the ocean which corresponds to the amniotic fluid in which human life begins, the ocean on whose surface vessels (personified as female) can ride but in whose depth sailors meet their death and monsters conceal themselves - this ocean lies somewhere between the earth.
and moon in the gynomorphising of nature.

Here, the ocean has been anthropomorphised as female, both in the vessels who sail across it, and in the association of water as a symbol of feminine reproduction and sexuality. The flashbacks and dream sequences depicting Jane running across the wet sand in her torn dress, her mascara smeared underneath her eyes as she processes the trauma of her rape, are juxtaposed against the present scenes of her running in the daylight as a form of both mental and physical exertion. In these sequences, Jane is shown to be exhausted after running, often isolating herself from her surroundings by wearing headphones, the loud music blasted to the audience in bursts between her heavy breathing. The symbolism of the ocean is employed in *Big Little Lies* as a way of mirroring the often intangible, conflicting experiences of motherhood, where intense feelings of chaotic anger can clash with an encompassing love that, like the ocean reaching the shores, is continuous and never broken.

In Episode 4 “Push Comes to Shove”, an extreme close up of Jane’s face fills the darkened screen as she lies awake in her bed, a bed that happens to be a fold-out mattress in the loungeroom while her son, Ziggy sleeps in his bedroom. The scene is interspersed with the familiar images of Jane running in her torn evening dress following the imprinted footsteps of a man, presumably her rapist, who appears up ahead however, his image is translucent and fades before she is able to reach him. The scene then morphs into Jane, present day, running along the sand while continually cutting to the close-up of her eye, to show that this is not a dream, but a recent memory. A wide angle shot suddenly appears as Jane sprints towards the edge of a cliff, before switching to a low angle, medium shot to show Jane halting to a stop and breathing heavily, as she looks down at the waves crashing against the rocks. Jane’s constant oscillation between life and death, motherhood and trauma are symbolised through her
continued return to the ocean, simultaneously allowing for her internalised rage and conflicting identification as a mother, to be visually conveyed to the audience.

Jane’s desire to break free of the trauma that is binding her is made possible through her connections to Madeline and Celeste where they take on a share of the burden, joining her in runs along the sand and engaging in confessional dialogue where expressions of guilt and shame are normalised. Furthermore, the vast unknowingness of the ocean comes to reflect the multi-layered characterisation of the women who each hold deep secrets and are depicted as being more than their identity as mothers, yet are intrinsically connected with their children.

Confessional dialogue
The title of this chapter is derived from Rich’s (1976: 37) statement that ‘it’s not enough to let our children go; we need selves of our own to return to’, thereby implying that women need to find identities outside of their children and their role as mothers, so as to not be empty vessels. Each of the women in *Big Little Lies* seek to reclaim an identifiable self that is fulfilling outside of their identification as mothers. Later on in Episode 4, Jane confesses to Madeline that she thought the reaction she had to her assault was too big,

I pretended like it meant nothing, so of course, it came to mean everything. It’s like I had to say those stupid words that he said to me, out loud to you, for them to lose their power, like keeping them a secret helped them retain their power.

This extract reflects the power in the confessional dialogue shared between Jane and Madeline, where a part of Jane’s self, lost during her assault, is given the potential to be re-awakened. Jane recalls having a physical reaction to the confession, as opening up about her trauma has ‘done something to my body, it’s like it’s waking up…I keep finding myself looking at men, not just in a sexual way, but in an appreciative way, a sensual way, maybe?’ (1.4). Jane’s desire to leap forward into the unknown, to explore her sexuality further and step outside the confines
from which she has been placed as a mother, comes to fruition when she accepts a date with the local cafe owner Tom to the school trivia night. From the beginning of the series, Madeline takes on the role as guide, and informal mother-figure to Jane, seeing her in a similar light as herself when she was a single mother with her eldest daughter, Abigail, a relationship which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two.

Confessional dialogue is further dramatised through the ongoing investigation into the unknown murder that occurs at the school trivia night. Running parallel to present-day Monterey, the series is interspersed with police interviews of fellow parents undergoing questioning in the weeks that follow the events of the final episode. As a result, there is a conversational, gossip-like tone to this dialogue, allowing for parents to freely speak about the toxic feuding between mothers at the school and of the five women in question of the murder: Madeline, Renata, Celeste, Bonnie and Jane. One interviewee questioned whether Jane had to be ‘running from something’ (1.2) while it was later suggested she was ‘insane too’ (1.5) along with Madeline and Celeste who ‘had drinking problems’ (1.2), after they were seen sharing a glass of wine on a school night. It’s during this exchange that Madeline confides with Celeste about the extra-marital affair she had a year ago with the stage producer of the local theatre company she worked at. The openness of this conversation allows for Madeline to expose her vulnerabilities and failures as a mother stating, 'I’m a married woman…I hated every minute of it’ (1.4) however, Celeste only laughs amusedly in response and the tone quickly turns humorous, as the women both acknowledge that Madeline secretly enjoyed the passionate affair.

Forced to quit her job by her over-powering and abusive husband in order to be completely devoted to her family, Celeste briefly returns to her roots as a lawyer in “Push Comes to Shove”
as a legal aid to help with the approval of Madeline’s controversial theatre production “Avenue Q” by the Monterey Community Board. After the meeting, Celeste admits to Madeline that she felt a sense of empowerment in taking on a role outside her full-time job as a mother, ‘for six years, I’ve been wiping runny noses, organising play dates, doing everything to be a “Good Mom”. You know, today I felt alive, I felt good’ (1.4). Although, as Diane Negra argues (2008: 5) ‘the post-feminist subject is represented as having lost herself but then (re) achieving stability through romance, de-aging, a makeover, by giving up paid work, or by “coming home”’, Big Little Lies provides a counter-argument to the traditional post-feminist narrative by characterising the women as unfulfilled by their maternal and financial subject-positions. Finding a sense of empowerment, sexuality and sense of self outside of these socially-accepted identities does however, bring with it a sense of guilt and shame when not conforming to the expected image of good motherhood. As Celeste remarks, ‘I feel so ashamed in saying this, but being a mom is not enough for me. It’s not even close…I’m evil! I’m evil!’ (1.4).

Through the interweaving of personal testimony and social commentary, Rich suggests that feelings of failure and resentment are all part of the collective, common experience of motherhood, stating ‘I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom’ (1976: 21). Rich reinforces Celeste’s suppressed rage about remaining the selfless, devoted mother while she struggles with the conflict and desire of returning to the workforce. Through the process of confiding, both to the audience and between the characters themselves, internalised anxieties about the double-bind of motherhood are able to be expressed allowing for a moment of catharsis and companionship. Invoking the consciousness raising practices of second-wave feminists, women who ‘shared and analysed personal narratives in order to shift the terrain of their interpretation from the
personal to the political’ (Hogeland, 2016: 24) allowed for a transaction to occur between cultural text (usually a novel), author/producer and reader/audience thus, generating ‘a new and newly politicised understanding of herself and her society’ (Hogeland, 2016: 23).

Confessional dialogue between the central characters allows for the inner workings of their psyche to be unravelled in front of the audience. The act of sharing deeply personal secrets becomes a way to understand the barriers afflicting their everyday life, helping to underscore how their problems are not just individual, but are experienced on a collective level, thereby affirming the series’ alignment with the second-wave feminist mantra: “the personal is political”. Both Madeline and Jane experience a desire to understand their selves outside of their experience of motherhood that often coalesces into outbursts of rage, such as when Jane slams down a knife (1.4) and throws a phone in anger while screaming (1.5).

Furthermore, Madeline’s constant display of emotional exertion where she is seen swearing, screaming, and crying often in the privacy of her own home, is juxtaposed to the image she presents of the composed and well-kept mother. In another interview, one parent comments that ‘Madeline had anger issues. [She was an] itty-bitty, ball of rage’ (1.3). The use of the phrase “itty-bitty” connotes one who is immature or not fully developed, which not only ties into Madeline’s small frame, but simultaneously works to dismiss her emotions as that of a small child throwing a tantrum. Debra Langan (2012: 269) suggests that ‘mothers’ strains are often viewed as personal or intrapsychic, not socially caused, which creates the impression that it is their fault that they are stressed and finding it difficult to cope’. As Langan implies, mothers are traditionally tasked with the responsibility of not only looking good, but of maintaining an imperceptible, stress-free aura in order to successfully care for their children, the home and their partner and any failure to do so, is solely placed on the mother’s shoulders. However, as
Douglas and Michaels suggest, the New Momism ‘seeks to contain and, where possible, eradicate, all of the social changes brought on by feminism’ (2005: 23). In turn engraining in the psyche of all women a vulnerability that constantly calls into question their capabilities, the New Momism can thus, be seen to be ‘deeply and powerfully political’ (2005:23).

**Conditional mother-love**

*Big Little Lies* seamlessly critiques the image of the “hysterical” woman by demonstrating how motherhood as a patriarchal institution, denounces emotional and physical displays of anger as being unfeminine or as a characteristic of “bad” mothering. As Rich (1976: 46) reiterates, ‘mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood’. The men in this show are often tasked with the responsibility of “reigning-in” the expressions of female anger. When Renata questions the school’s response to her daughter’s bullying, her husband Gordon apologises on their behalf stating, ‘excuse my wife, she’s very upset’ (1.5). While Gordon appears unaffected, the apologetic tone works to depict Renata as irrational, further invalidating her feelings and response as a protective mother. In a similar light, Nathan, Madeline’s ex-husband and the new partner of the eco-conscious, new-aged yogi Bonnie, remarks ‘I believe women are chemically incapable of forgiving’ (1.6). The choice of the words “chemically incapable” infers a biological pre-determinism positioning women as unstable and unbalanced.

Similarly, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* the use of biologically-determined rhetoric is employed as a matter of enslaving the women to their own bodies. As Alice Adams examines, ’the Commanders effectively use the Handmaids biologically reinforced maternal consciousness to prevent them from resisting their own enslavement or establishing coalitions across class

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8 The word “hysteria” originates from the Greek root *hystera*, meaning “uterus”. Denotes a biological defect in “the womb” of woman.
boundaries’ (1994: 111). One particular example is when Commander Waterford, amongst fellow Gileadean officials exclaims, ‘this is our fault, we gave them more than they could handle. They focused on academic pursuits and lost sight of their real purpose, we won’t let that happen again’ (1.6). The use of the collective “we” pronoun establishes a communal identity between the male leaders of Gilead, where they deem themselves as a part of a higher order responsible for determining the fate of the nation, through their control over women and in particular, of their “duty” to become mothers. In both texts, the overt display of female emotion is silenced by quips about how a woman should behave stemming from out-dated rhetoric over a woman’s biological destiny.

While *The Handmaid’s Tale* directly confronts this assumption with the literal imprisonment of women to both their bodies and to the state of Gilead, *Big Little Lies* subtly addresses this through the confessional dialogue between the mothers and the interviewees in the murder investigation, where the unrealistic pressures placed upon mothers to “have it all” are critiqued and destabilised. Both texts demonstrate the harm in ascribing essentialist reproductive rhetoric to women, by highlighting a sense of unfulfillment as a shared experience of contemporary mothering as well as calling upon a detachment from “mother” as the sole identity of adult womanhood. Building upon these ideas, the following chapter will analyse the transgressive representation of motherhood as working outside of the dichotomy of “good” and “bad”, where the possibility for failure contributes to an authentic viewing experience for the audience as they share in the anxieties of motherhood and the greater encounters with trauma that are pertinent to all women.
Chapter Two: “Momism” is the new black

The boundaries demarcating contemporary motherhood are governed by a reciprocal relationship between the wider public and the media texts they consume. By determining and thus disseminating an idealised image of motherhood that is deemed respectable, audiences are tasked with both consuming and critiquing performances of “good” and “bad” mothering. This chapter will examine the different and often conflicting, characterisations of contemporary mothering that are represented in Big Little Lies. By addressing the practices of self-surveillance and the monitoring of mothering behaviour, both of the other women and of the individuals themselves, Big Little Lies delivers a complex critique of motherhood as a site of renewed anxiety in which all women can be categorised as bad mothers in some capacity. However, whilst Big Little Lies provides a counter-narrative to the ideal of ‘coming home’ (Negra, 2008: 25) and retreating to the domestic sphere as the ultimate achievement of adult womanhood, it still works within these confines in order to appeal to the assumed audience of middle-aged women who tune into suburban dramas. Adopting a similar premise to the idyllic, yet troubled neighbourhoods of popular prime-time television shows such as Desperate Housewives (American Broadcasting Company, 2004 - 2012) and Revenge (American Broadcasting Company, 2011-2015), Big Little Lies is ostensibly a murder-mystery series focusing on the machinations of female-centred drama in American suburbia.

However, as the series unravels, it appears less concerned with the ‘whodunit’ narrative and school-yard bickering, instead putting a spotlight on the ‘utterly natural rendering of violence as an ordinary part of women’s lives’ (Tolentino, 2017), with Emily Nussbaum describing the show as a ‘reflection on trauma’ (qtd in Tolentino, 2017). As previously discussed in Chapter One, each of the women in Big Little Lies gradually reveal their “big little” secrets, all of which
contribute to or challenge their understanding of their identity outside of motherhood. This chapter will expand upon those revelations in order to understand how ‘minor social transactions between women can express the nuances of violence’ (Tolentino, 2017) and the accumulation of trauma as a hallmark of female experience. As previously suggested, confessional dialogue allows for the characters to experience moments of catharsis, allowing for internalised anxieties and repressed emotions to be shared amongst female confidants. As Douglas and Michaels (2005: 6) suggest, ‘motherhood has become a psychological policed state’ and it is here, within this competitive atmosphere, that I begin my analysis of Monterey and the “good” mother complex.

Good enough mothers
As reproductive vessels, women’s bodies are scrutinised for their ability to contribute to the nation and raise children who will become viable, “good” citizens. To be “good” means ‘to be desired or approved of’⁹; it defines one who has achieved the highest quality and standards in a certain field while also eliciting connotations of being righteous, virtuous, and upholding morals antithetical to that which is considered bad or evil. I will be using the term “good” throughout this chapter to refer to mothering practices considered to be successful, while also being used to distinguish between certain figures as either “good” or “bad” mothers. It must be noted however, that such ideals are drawn from Western discourses and shaped by changing economic, socio-political and historical contexts that, through the control and response to mainstream media, determine appropriate behaviours and govern what tastes are deemed of a high order. In the same vein, what makes a mother “bad” is also a product of its time, producing certain ‘vicissitudes of taste and behaviour’ (Whelehan, 2012: 148) that generate informal codes of conduct whereby, a mother hitting her child with a wooden spoon is considered an

⁹ Oxford English Dictionary
acceptable form of punishment in one era, and then child abuse in another. The reprimanding tactics of surveillance employed by the media subsequently create ‘an interlocking, cumulative image of the dedicated, doting “mom” versus the delinquent, bad “mother”’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 7). As Imelda Whelehan (2012: 148) suggests,

what does not seem to change is the intense feelings of inadequacy and guilt suffered by many mothers who regard themselves as perpetually on the threshold of bad motherhood – not because they actively harm or neglect their children, but because of their conflicted responses to their offspring, exacerbated by the volume of advice available to new moms, which implies that there is a single model of “good” motherhood.

All of the women in *Big Little Lies* express such sentiments of guilt surrounding their mothering capabilities, whether it be in their role as a single mother (Jane), their ability to balance a career and motherhood (Renata), their inability to leave an abusive relationship (Celeste) or the manoeuvring of shared parental arrangements (Bonnie and Madeline). As Whelehan (2012: 148) claims above, the feeling of being ‘perpetually on the threshold of bad motherhood’ is what incites such intense anxieties in the show, rather than a physical or direct display of harm against their children. Throughout the series, Jane constantly questions whether her parenting skills are adequate and if her child’s traumatic conception has influenced any potential for violence in his personality. In one particular scene, Jane expresses to Madeline that she ‘needs to do what’s best for my kid. [Even if] I don’t know what that is’ (1.4) to which Madeline replies, ‘what about what’s good for us?’. In this exchange, Madeline uses the second-person pronoun “us” to show how she is absorbing and sharing in Jane’s feelings of failure, while simultaneously responding on behalf of her own struggles and of the common feelings of inadequacy faced by mothers as they constantly place the needs of the child before the needs of themselves. Douglas and Michaels attest to the potential for motherhood to be empowering.
when accepted as a common, shared experience, as ‘…motherhood is a collective experience. We want to erase the amnesia about motherhood – we do have a common history, it does tie us together and it has made us simultaneously guilt-ridden and ready for an uprising’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 25).

Although not an uprising in the political sense, *Big Little Lies* provides a space for its characters to push back against the regulatory framework of motherhood and challenge the expectations that mothering is the great achievement of adult womanhood. As previously explored in Chapter One, the women all grapple with the idea that love and anger can coexist in the mothering experience, with Rich (1976: 52) suggesting that both feelings can be simultaneously present creating a source of inner turmoil:

> anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not “loving”; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration.

Arriving to Monterey in the hopes of giving her son better schooling opportunities and to establish a new beginning outside her traumatic past, Jane’s experience of motherhood is one of both turmoil and sacrifice. A single mother, a young mother and a mother who fails to maintain the ‘well-kept-home and well-kept body ideal’ (Negra, 2008: 118), Jane is immediately established as an outlier and must constantly work to prove her mothering capabilities. After being accused on more than one occasion of inflicting pain upon fellow student Amabella, Ziggy is explicitly shunned by the parents, creating further divisions between the children. After Renata refuses to invite Ziggy to her daughter Amabella’s birthday party, battle lines are drawn and boycotts are enforced, culminating in the petition for Ziggy’s expulsion from the school. Fuelled by such anger, Jane ends up confronting Renata at the
school, causing her to lash out and hit Renata in the eye. In this scene, Jane comes to embody the ultimate act of “bad” mothering through her display of physical violence. However, this outburst of internalised rage comes to symbolise her anger at the larger institutional barriers that question her capabilities to raise a child successfully on her own.

Born out of rape, Jane constantly questions whether Ziggy will too develop violent tendencies, stating that ‘violence could be in his DNA, considering who his Dad was’ (1.7) however, she also questions whether ‘If I did everything properly as a mother, everything would be fine and he wouldn’t be behaving this way’ (1.5). Here, Jane explicitly addresses the long-standing nature vs. nurture debate that has circulated in parenting communities for generations as she questions whether Ziggy’s alleged behaviour has developed as a result of her failure as a mother, or if it was biologically determined by his father’s destructive force. Throughout the series, Jane seeks validation from authority figures; a child psychologist who assesses Ziggy behaviour (1.4), Ziggy’s teacher who constantly affirms her belief that he is a pure, loving child (1.6), and of course, Madeline who acts as a soundboard and support system, using her child, Chloe as collateral in response to Renata’s forced ostracisation. Although Madeline was also a single mother with her eldest child Abigail, she was a “good” single mother who was abandoned by her first husband Nathan, ‘as opposed to being a single mother by choice’ (Feasey, 2012: 73) and thus, calls upon the audience to sympathise with her and her ability to have “re-built” her image by establishing a new husband and conforming to the image of the white, middle-class, self-sacrificing mother.

Throughout the series, it is eventually revealed that the child who was bullying Amabella was Max, one of Celeste’s twin boys, who had further threatened Ziggy to keep quiet and take the blame for his actions. When Jane tells Celeste what she has learnt about Max, she seeks to
comfort her, stating ‘they’re kids Celeste, they bully. It’s human nature, they’ll grow out of it’ to which Celeste replies, ‘sometimes they don’t’ (1.7). The revelation that Max’s violent behaviour had developed as a result of witnessing the abuse orchestrated by his father, finally pushes Celeste to leave Perry and re-establish a safe living environment for the sake of her children. Celeste does so in one of the penultimate scenes before Perry’s death (1.7):

**Perry:** ‘We have a family, Celeste. You have to think about the boys’.

**Celeste:** ‘It’s not the way a man should hit a woman. Men should never hit women. Is it any wonder it was him [Max]?’

**Perry:** ‘The boys have never seen anything’.

**Celeste:** ‘You don’t know that. If they haven’t seen it, they’ve heard it. They know what their father does to their mother’.

**Perry:** ‘If you could just help me, help myself. I’m sick. I’ll do whatever it takes, I promise you. In sickness and in health, we took a vow’.

**Celeste:** ‘Yes - to have and to hold, to respect, to cherish. They were our vows. Not smashing my head against a wall, NOT fucking hurting me. I have to leave for them’.

This exchange reflects Celeste’s depth and development as a character as she finally recognises herself as a victim of violence and that her children have become victims vicariously. Furthermore, this scene exposes the oppressive strategies employed by Perry and of perpetrators of abuse in general, that shame and manipulate women into staying in these relationships in order to uphold the sanctity of marriage and the family unit. On the surface, Perry is an exceptional father to his children, a loving and affectionate husband and, a successful businessman who allows his family to live an attractive lifestyle, all of which makes the battery and abuse Celeste endures harder to escape from. In their counselling sessions, Celeste acknowledges that she and Perry ‘turn each other on by rage’ (1.5) and that they’re
‘bound by everything we’ve been through. It’s like tearing flesh’ (1.5). The words “bound” and “tearing flesh” allude to the visceral connection shared between Celeste and Perry where her sense of identity is tied up in the union of two souls that she shares through her marriage. Their relationship appears unusually affectionate to onlooking parents desiring the same level of intimacy even through parenthood, ‘people over forty shouldn’t be gushy, it’s not cute’ (1.1). However, their relationship is ‘actually a maelstrom of co-dependency and marital rape’ (Tolentino, 2017) and *Big Little Lies* paints a painfully realistic image of such domestic abuse victims by showing Celeste both fighting back against Perry’s blows through violence of her own, and simultaneously searching for lust and sensuality in the violence that is exhibited.

Celeste’s abuse inhibits her ability to engage in what Sharon Hays (1996) coins as “intensive mothering” that is, of being the all-seeing, all-knowing expert of everything there is to do with their children’s lives. Instead, she relies on a nanny, despite not being involved in any part-time or full-time work at the behest of her husband. Celeste’s ethereal, absent-minded presence inhibits her ability to watch and monitor Max’s potentially violent behaviour. By constantly withdrawing into the comfort of her own mind, Celeste attempts to suppress the trauma she is experiencing day to day. This is achieved through the literal drowning out of her surroundings as depicted through the muffling of diegetic sound and the distorted, unfocused camera framing which track Celeste throughout the series. The commentary that Celeste was ‘rich, beautiful [so] something had to be wrong’ (1.3) attests to the intense policing of women’s bodies, success and capability as mother’s that is constantly scrutinised to find potential failures. As Diane Negra observes, ‘postfeminism fetishises female power and desire, while consistently placing these within firm limits’ (2008: 4), and this is achieved by ‘relentlessly stressing matrimonial and materialist models of female subjectivity’ (2008: 5). As a text that both critiques and responds to postfeminism, *Big Little Lies* goes against the grain of maternalistic popular
cultural texts by demonstrating how the choice narrative does not always equate to success and the ability to “have it all”.

Furthermore, through its depiction of the volatility and complexity of abusive relationships, *Big Little Lies* opens up a resounding commentary on the trauma and violence experienced by women beyond just the physical whilst also providing practical solutions for viewers in similar situations. In one of the most poignant seasons of the series, Celeste’s counsellor advises her to ‘start documenting the abuse, write everything down, take photos, doctor’s reports. It’s important in a custody case, and men like your husband will go for custody. They have the money, the resources, the contacts and most importantly, the ego. Find a friend to confide in. Do it today’ (1.6). Here, the counsellor provides an educational and resourceful lens through which Celeste can view a life outside of her toxic marriage. At the same time, she offers a compassionate source of support, refuge and safety that had been relatively absent from Celeste’s life due to the insurmountable feeling of shame and guilt she had come to associate with the breakdown of her marriage and more importantly, of her failing as a mother.

**Raising daughters**
Alongside these feelings of internal conflict and guilt arises the complex mother-daughter relationship and the ‘fear of becoming one’s mother’ (Rich, 1976: 235 original emphasis) also known as “Matrophobia”. In *Big Little Lies*, the absence of the character’s relations to their own mothers reinforces their desire to mother under their own control, supporting Douglas and Michaels’ (2005: 11) suggestion that many mothers ‘didn’t want to be like our mothers and many of us didn’t want to raise our kids the way they raised us’. In the episode “Somebody’s Dead”, Jane is shown having a tense phone call with her own mother about the events of Ziggy’s first day of school. On the other end of the line, her mother’s muffled voice is heard asking Jane why she ‘chose to move their all alone’ (1.1) to which Jane responds in frustration,
‘do we have to get into this every single time we talk?’ In this exchange, Jane’s independence and authority as a mother is questioned as her own mother tries to assert control over her daughter by having her move back home. Her mother’s use of the word “chose”, a word that forms part of the lexical chain of postfeminist dialogue, alongside the adverbial phrase “all alone”, contributes to the idea that Jane’s isolation and anxiety as a mother is self-inflicted. Rather than choosing to remain in the safe confines of her parents’ home, Jane’s decision to move to Monterey reflects a desire to carve out her own pathway as a mother.

As Douglas and Michaels further examine, the New Momism also became a way of re-crafting motherhood in light of the “past mistakes” of mothers gone before. As a result, mothers are tasked with an unachievable standard of perfection and sense of threat ‘that the media ceaselessly atomise into the air we breathe’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 3). While mainstream media is seen to celebrate motherhood through the over-saturation of mom-lit and mom-flicks, it simultaneously promulgates an idealised image of motherhood that is beyond reach as Douglas and Michaels (2005: 3) suggest, ‘81% of women in a recent poll said it’s harder to be a mother now than it was twenty or thirty years ago, and 56% felt mothers were doing a worse job today than mothers back then’.

Madeline’s anxiety about her children ‘slipping away’ (1.1) is portrayed as two-fold: on one level, her younger daughter Chloe’s independence on her first day of school is dramatised through the phrase ‘marched into the school like some sort of a woman child’ (1.1) in order to exemplify how this new beginning marks a weakening of Madeline’s total control over Chloe’s life while on the other hand, Abigail begins to form a strong bond with her stepmother Bonnie, which Madeline perceives as a threat to her identification as Abigail’s sole mother. The increased diversification of blended family units and the destabilisation of the traditional
nuclear model has of course, challenged the outdated assumption that the biological mother ‘caring for their own children within the confines of a private…household where the mother has almost total responsibility of childrearing’ (O’Brien Hallstein 2010: 37) is the most accepted way to raise a child. Madeline stresses to her husband Ed, ‘I’m a Mom, this is my universe and currently that universe is in fucking meltdown because my eldest daughter wants to hang out with her fucking step-thing’ (1.1). Madeline clearly struggles to reconcile the shifting dynamics of her role as a mother by denouncing Bonnie as a “step thing” rather than working on a collaborative, shared model of parenting.

While Abigail reassures Madeline that she is ‘your daughter and you’re my mother’ (1.1) she eventually decides to move in with her father Nathan and stepmom Bonnie, in order to live in an environment she deems less stressful and more in tune with her newfound sense of self. After finding out that Bonnie took Abigail to receive birth control from Planned Parenthood, Madeline reprimands Bonnie for overstepping her boundaries claiming, ‘It’s my daughter. My daughter’ (1.2). Madeline’s need to emphasise that Abigail is “my daughter” reflects her anxieties about losing Abigail to a competing mother-figure. Bonnie’s carefree, expressive aura is juxtaposed to Madeline’s overbearing, intrusive parenting style that Abigail finds suffocating and limiting to her potential as she grows into a young woman.

Through extreme desperation, Madeline laments that ‘[Abigail] wouldn’t leave if I had cancer’ but she would ‘be willing to get it’ (1.3) if it meant she could keep Abigail close to her and within the confines of her own domestic hearth. Later in the series, it’s revealed Abigail’s “secret project” has been to auction off her virginity in order to raise money and draw awareness for Amnesty International and sex trafficking, as she sees ‘a 16-year-old white girl from Monterey selling her virginity online [to be] the way’ (1.6). While Abigail views this as
an act of shock value for a ‘good cause’ (1.6), Madeline forcefully reminds Abigail ‘your body is not for sale, no matter the reason, no matter the cost’ (1.6), thus, demonstrating Madeline’s deep concern and love for her daughter’s safety and the sanctity of her body that comes before anything else. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (qtd in Cobb, 2014: 100) suggests that filmic and televisual performances of the mother-daughter relationship and the way it displaces rage allow for a deeper political reading of such a complex, often fractured bond:

when young adults displace their problems, whether personal or social, onto their midlife mothers, they are displacing anger more rightly directed at other targets, such as patriarchy or cutthroat capitalism.

*Big Little Lies* is about the interconnected lives of suburban women traversing the everyday trauma, grief and shame associated with contemporary motherhood. It is also as much about the children and their permeable absorption of the pain, love and sacrifice that is reverberated throughout the home and transposed onto their conception of self and relation to the outside world.

**The Mommy Wars**
Underpinning all of this is the prevalence of the so-called “mommy wars” between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers which Stephanie Wardrop (2012) suggests is a negative impact of “choice feminism”. The rhetoric of choice suggests that women have newfound control over their decision to become mothers, their decision to stay-at-home or their decision to return to the workforce. Through this, perceptions of mothering have been unequivocally altered. In her work analysing the intersections of neoliberalism and the de-politicisation of motherhood, Joanne Baker (2014) analyses how government addresses to women have increasingly utilised the rhetoric of choice. The pervasive influence of neoliberalism in the past thirty years can be understood to be one of the most significant factors contributing to the
changing social and cultural conditions of mothering. For Baker (2014: 178), as contemporary, post-feminist motherhood is characterised by its progressive ability to be a chosen, rather than imposed state, ‘articulating the difficulties of an experience that is deemed to have been “chosen” is replete with challenges’. To admit failure as a mother, in the one aspect of life that women are deemed to have total control and instinctual capabilities, is a significant challenge amidst the harsh expectations of a neoliberal environment.

Within this environment emerges the anxiety-inducing practice of intensive mothering, where ‘everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 6). It is through this lens of surveillance and policing that assumptions over the correct way to mother are readily introduced. In a time where women are expected to maintain a career yet simultaneously retreat to the home in order to remain completely devoted to their family, it is of no surprise that motherhood generates such intense conflicts both within and between mothers. These tensions between mothers who choose to remain at home and with mothers who decide to remain in, or return to the workforce, is heightened by the creation and circulation of “media panics”, about the sanctity and unity of the family and by extension, the nation. As Stephanie Wardrop (2012: 35) suggests,

*USA Today* has recently recast the war between stay-at-home moms and working moms as a battle between “alpha moms,” who bake elaborate concoctions for school fundraisers and dress impeccably while piling their kids in and out of the minivan for ballet, tea ball, and class field trips, versus the “beta moms,” who schlep around in sweatpants, forget to wash their hair, and, more egregiously, forget the due dates for permission slips or fail to negotiate the Byzantine workings of their kids’ after-school schedules.
This dichotomy between “alpha moms” and “beta moms” is played out in *Big Little Lies* where the mothers of Monterey are divided by their mothering and work commitments. In the opening episode, Madeline defines herself as a stay-at-home mom despite working part-time at the local theatre company. Although she asserts her part-time job ‘doesn’t really count’ as the ‘over and under in this town is about $150,000’ (1.1), Madeline isn’t phased by her economic return as she views her role as a mother to be more significant in establishing cultural capital,

‘It’s like us against them. The *career mommies*. Them and all their various board meetings that are *so* important…Please! I think they spend more time in board meetings than they do actual parenting (1.1).

In a later episode, Renata confides in her husband Gordon, that ‘I’m the one getting vilified…because I’m a working mum, *worse I’m a CEO*, which deems me a bitch, *you* have no idea’ (1.7). This exchange further exacerbates the different expectations for Renata and Gordon, both of whom are in high profile corporate careers, yet Renata is the only one who is criticised for any absenteeism. Although this battle between stay-at-home moms and working moms still exists, both Madeline and Renata can be seen to embody the characteristics of “alpha moms” for their hyper vigilance and emersion in every aspect of their daughter’s lives, whilst maintaining a well-kept image. Comparatively, Jane embodies the “beta mom” as she fails to maintain a presentable appearance, choosing to dress in skinny jeans, flannel tops and converse shoes while the other mothers dress in co-ordinated, designer outfits. Besides Bonnie’s home, which is nestled in a forest sanctuary, Jane’s is the only home that is away from the ocean and of a markedly smaller scale to the grandiose, modern houses of Renata, Celeste and Madeline.

Jane’s failure to maintain the ideal balance between the well-kept home and well-kept body is made more apparent when she neglects her responsibilities towards Ziggy’s schooling life - by forgetting the due date of one of Ziggy’s school projects (1.2) and in a later scene, leaving
behind the class toy, Harry the Hippo at an excursion to Disney on Ice (1.3). In every sense, Jane is depicted as a “bad” mother by failing to conform to the regulatory dimensions of contemporary, neoliberal motherhood. However, Big Little Lies trouble this assumption by depicting Jane’s selflessness as she sleeps on a fold-out lounge and takes work wherever she can in order to provide Ziggy with the best opportunities growing up. Big Little Lies complicates the idea that a “good” mother is someone who ‘sacrifices something she has and wants, or is willing to do so, for the good of another’ (Elaine Tuttle Hansen, 1997: 23). Jane demonstrates the ability for mothers to embody the dichotomous characteristics of “good” and “bad” mothering. Instead, Jane finds middle-ground between her identity as a mother and as a woman by showing it is okay to be a mother who is just “good enough”.

At a distinct parallel, Renata is the only full-time working mother of the core ensemble and is markedly older than the other mothers, reflecting her image as a career woman who embarked upon motherhood later in life. As both herself and her husband Gordon are in high-profile positions in the corporate world, Renata requires a nanny to help look after Amabella. Subsequently, Renata’s absence from the every-day minutia of Amabella’s life forces her to join every committee offered by the school and wider community in order to demonstrate her dedication to her role as a mother. After throwing a lavishly, over-the-top party for Amabella’s birthday, Renata complains that it was still not enough to simply buy her daughter’s happiness and instead, suggests Amabella seek counselling for her abnormal behaviour. Renata constantly seeks to compensate for her absenteeism by bubble-wrapping Amabella and shielding her from any outside interference however, this works to further isolate Renata from establishing a strong mother-daughter relationship. While discouragingly questioning whether she is ‘tragically unfun (sic)’ (1.3), Gordon reassures Renata that she is still managing to balance it
all (her work, the home and her body), despite having a secret affair with the foreign nanny, Juliette, the entire time.

**Beautiful trauma**
The intersecting lives of Madeline, Renata, Celeste and Jane are constantly surveyed against practices of “good” or “bad” mothering, with each of the woman’s mothering capabilities questioned in some capacity or another. Compared to Madeline’s ongoing feuds with Renata and Bonnie and Jane’s constant need to defend Ziggy’s alleged violence, Celeste doesn’t engage in any of the schoolyard machinations. While this works to further support her image as composed and unaffected, she harbours a darkness that when discovered, unravels her completely. After Madeline’s affair begins to resurface and her husband, Ed begins to piece everything together, she runs away to a secluded corner where she is comforted by Jane who reassures her, ‘we’re not perfect, welcome to the club. We’re all fucked up’ (1.7). Jane’s comment provides for dramatic irony as it precedes the climactic death at the Monterey School trivia night, further alluding to the revelations of each character’s troubled, complex identities and experiences of trauma.

Upon realising that Jane’s rapist was Celeste’s husband all along, Perry’s violent recidivism is exposed to both the audience, and the women themselves. Through the commotion, Madeline, Renata and Jane all try to protect Celeste from Perry, who begins to attack her in a fit of desperate rage. With every blow he inflicts, the scene intercuts with familiar images of waves crashing forcefully against the rocks, while the melancholic interlude of Agnes Obel’s *September Song* silences the noise from the commotion itself. However, the struggle is brought to an abrupt end when Bonnie runs through the other women, pushing Perry off the edge to his death. This haunting display symbolises the show’s commentary on violence as a part of
women’s everyday experiences by alluding to Bonnie’s own history with domestic violence, as a trigger for her reaction to Perry.

One of the key themes of *Big Little Lies* is the polarising force of life as both beautiful and traumatic. Just as motherhood incites feelings of love, anger, selflessness and resentment, it also provides a source of hope, with the final scene depicting Renata, Bonnie, Celeste, Madeline and Jane peacefully playing along the beach and enjoying a picnic with their children. Whatever the differences held before, these five women’s lives are now forever interconnected. Their failures are recognised, and the constant pressure to surveil themselves and each other is lifted, making way for a new bond of female solidarity to be created in light of the crime they were all privy to. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1997:10) suggests, ‘the role of the bad mother is, in fact, empowering’ and despite all of these women constantly challenging the expectations of “good” mothering, they provide a counter-narrative that embraces their failures, allowing for “good enough” mothers to be written into the fabric of popular mothering discourses. In the following chapter, I will examine the heightened tactics of surveillance and monitoring that are present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. While *Big Little Lies* presents a realistic insight into the polarising effect of the New Momism in defining women as “good” or “bad” mothers, the next chapter will focus on the dystopian setting of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its role in dramatising the growing assault on women’s bodies that are being carried out through very real policy and legislative changes.
Chapter Three: Regulating the female body

Originally written during the height of the Reagan administration (1981-1989), the televisual adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* reimagines the dystopian nightmare of Gilead for contemporary America, where rapid changes to women’s reproductive rights in policymaking reflects the ideology of the burgeoning alt-right movement who ‘believe women should simply be mothers, wives, and daughter[s]’ (Marghitu and Moore Johnson, 2018: 183). In this chapter, I will argue that the sexual politics of *The Handmaid’s Tale* critiques the renewed desire for women to retreat to the domestic sphere, despite emerging in a context where women are taking a strong, respected stance on sexual harassment across all industries, and are constantly shifting the traditionally gendered work-place paradigms.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* has ‘televisually resurfaced as a cautionary tale of the white male supremacist alt-right agenda’ (Marghitu and Moore Johnson, 2018: 183), and it is of no surprise that the threat of the Trump-Pence government to women and minorities alike, has ushered in a rise of what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2017) defines as ‘popular feminism’. This urgent resistance amongst feminists has seen a rise in “hashtag activism” across social media platforms. Through movements such as the #MeToo stance against sexual harassment, co-opted primarily by celebrities in the film and television industries, women’s bodies and their sexual autonomy has never been more at the forefront of social and political concern.

While The United States is positioned as the “leader of the free world” and the foundation for many social and political movements both now and throughout history, it is experiencing a resurgence of radically conservative ideologies that are threatening the independence women have continually fought for. Banet-Weiser further suggests that popular feminism is accompanied by ‘popular misogyny, which is a crucial component of Trump and Pence’s
platform of populism that continues to channel the alt-right’s sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and ableist rhetoric’ (qtd in. Marghitu and Moore Johnson, 2018: 184). When asked how the perception of The Handmaid’s Tale would have been altered if Hillary Clinton had become president, Margaret Atwood recently commented that it still ‘[would have] worked as a show, but it wouldn’t have worked the same way’ as ‘you always view these things through the lens of events that have taken place’ (qtd in. Setoodeh, 2018). It is through this lens that the turbulent context of The Handmaid’s Tale is made even more palpable, as the startling dystopia of the not-too-distant Gilead mirrors ‘one of the primary characteristics of the extreme right…[a] nostalgia for a particular kind of identity: the white, heterosexual man’ (Banet-Weiser and Ouellette, 2018: 5).

Alongside this nostalgia arises a re-domestication of women as their experiences and identities as mothers, ‘previously undervalued or devalued in economic, political, and cultural spheres, have become privileged at the same time that biological imperatives that women reproduce or are “naturally” mothers is being questioned’ (Podnieks, 2012: 9). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007:13) further acknowledge,

how a post 9/11 climate has shifted the American image repertoire to emphasise “traditional working-class masculinity and wives holding down the home front.” In the new climate of fear and vulnerability that is ushering in a rollback of civil rights, both the state and exalted popular culture franchises offer fantasies of patriarchal protection. These fantasies of patriarchal protection become fully embodied through the Commanders who ensure the Handmaids, and vicariously the Wives, are able to ‘fulfil [their] biological destiny in peace’ (1.5). This is achieved by removing the everyday minutia of their old lives, stripping back the anxieties of competitive mothering and removing the added stress of the postfeminist woman who must successfully balance the home, the family, the career and the body. However,
as I will outline below, there is still an inherent competitiveness amongst the Wives to see who will claim victory over the fertility battle and between the Handmaids, who are limited in time to save their own lives by reproducing as well. In the previous chapters, my analysis of Big Little Lies was supported by key scenes filled with rich dialogue about the anxieties of contemporary mothering, through the lens of a realistic drama series. By comparison, the forthcoming analysis of The Handmaid’s Tale will examine how the decay and dissolution of a dystopian genre reflects, and enables a critical commentary on, the symbolic violation of women’s bodies.

I will demonstrate this through four key points: the literal and metaphorical recurrence of “eyes” and seeing, the reclamation of a name in regaining one’s lost or stolen identity, the reconfiguration of the woman as confined to the home, and the visual iconography of colour to symbolise class and status. Furthermore, this chapter will analyse how The Handmaid’s Tale exposes the anxieties of contemporary motherhood, where tactics of monitoring and self-surveillance are employed in order to sustain the patriarchal ordinance of reproduction as a safeguard for the longevity of the nation.

An eye for an eye
As David J. Lorenzo (2014: 6) notes, ‘dystopias, in general, warn us against what is already present in our society and deliver the message that the deepening of problematic trends must be resisted, possibly through radical reform’. These very real warnings play out in The Handmaid’s Tale, where the infertility crisis is said to have resulted from sexually transmitted diseases and ecological disasters such as pollution and the use of pesticides on consumed crops. While the series provides quite an elusive, yet still plausible and legitimate reasoning for the mass decline in fertility rates, the religious undertone of the series runs parallel, with Aunt Lydia stating that ‘God whipped up a special plague, the plague of infertility’ (1.1). Just like
the Biblical Plagues of Egypt, the extreme loss of both human life and of the environment on a larger scale, are seen as a form of punishment for reckless and impure behaviour, ‘they were dirty women, they were *sluts*, but you were special girls, fertility is a gift from God’ (1.1). The notion of being “gifted” with fertility affords a certain sacredness, implying it had been taken for granted both by women within the show and also acting as a warning to those watching at home, as ‘dystopias argue that we may face a future in which life is much worse than is currently the case’ (Lorenzo, 2014: 7). Commander Waterford notes that the central goal of Gilead was to ‘make the world better’ (1.5) however, ‘better never means better for everyone, it always means worse for some’ (1.5). This narrow viewpoint employs the ideology that for some to advance, others must be in retreat and in this instance, the “other” is woman.

In order to police the continual success of such advancements, the Handmaids are placed under constant surveillance by multiple forces, including each other: ‘we go everywhere in two’s for protection and companionship…*Bullshit* there’s no friends here, we’re watching each other, she’s a spy and I’m hers’ (1.1). Here, Offred’s internal narration provides an insight into the complex state of emotion and fear of suspicion that contrasts with her placid, lifeless response towards her companion Ofglen, as she receives the good weather ‘with joy/praise be’ (1.1). Furthermore, the Handmaids greet each other with religious phrases such as ‘blessed be the fruit’, ‘may the Lord open’ and ‘under His eye’ (1.1). The pronoun “His” refers to both the secret police, known as the “eyes” who monitor the behaviour of the Handmaids and their respective families, as well as indicating that the actions of all Gileadeans are seen through the eyes of God, who is the supreme judge under a theocratic society. When observing Nick, a Guardian who lives above the Waterford’s garage and is tasked with household maintenance, Offred muses, ‘maybe he’s lonely, maybe he watches me, maybe he’s an eye’ (1.1). The repetition of the word “maybe” works to support the ambiguity and anxiety surrounding the
Handmaids as they are under the threat of constant surveillance. This threat of surveillance invokes Foucault’s image of the Panopticon, as ‘knowing that [they] may be observed from the tower at any time, the inmate takes over the job of policing [themselves]. The gaze which is inscribed in the very structure of the disciplinary institution is internalised by the inmate’ (Bartky, 1990: 79).

The absence of a tower at the centre of the prison complex is replaced by an omniscient presence that seeps into the minds of the Handmaids in order to engender self-surveillance. As Sandra Lee-Bartky (1990: 72) suggests, ‘in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other’. This patriarchal Other is made explicit in Gilead as the government is ruled by the male Commanders and enforced by the male Guardians who confine all women, both fertile and infertile, to the home as a way of reassuring their submission is maintained. Furthermore, the wings of the Handmaids’ bonnets provide the women with no peripheral vision, forcing them to constantly look down or forward. By masking their faces, the bonnets symbolise the Handmaids’ loss of individuality, further exaggerating their appearance as reproductive vessels who are stripped of an identification outside their role as mothers. The Handmaids are only allowed to experience full vision when they are in their homes, exemplifying their lack of authority and autonomy in the public sphere. Bartky (1990: 68) further acknowledges that ‘under the male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward’ and the winged bonnets allow for a literal exaggeration of this concept, further enforcing the idea that ‘the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to sovereign status of seer’ (Bartky 1990: 68).
In a further act of imprisonment, the women of Gilead are prohibited from reading any material and all forms of literature and popular culture is expunged from society. There is no form of entertainment and there is no opportunity to become enriched with knowledge, the women are simply there to reproduce. Even high-profile figures such as Serena Joy, one of the master orchestrators of the “Sons of Jacob”\(^{10}\), is forced to resign from her contributions and excluded from future meetings, devoid of seeing the inner workings of the new world she had envisioned. Douglas and Michaels (2005: 25) suggest, ‘the most powerful way that postfeminism worked to try to redomesticate women was through the new momism’. By inferring that women are the most suited at raising children who ‘need constant attention, cultivation, and adoration, or they’ll become failures and hate you forever’, mothers have been encouraged to leave the workforce, ‘as it’s much easier for [them] to abandon their work and their dreams than for fathers’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 25). This cumulative image of the self-sacrificing “good” mother, as disseminated through the surveillance tactics employed by mass media, actively embraces those women who retreat to the domestic sphere, a central argument employed by a pre-Gileadean Serena Joy, who called for a return to traditionalism in her time as a televangelist and ‘advocator for domestic feminism’ (1.6).

In a flashback scene in episode 6, Serena and the Commander are at a movie theatre and eating popcorn when Serena proposes the grand idea of ‘fertility as a natural resource…a moral imperative’\(^{(1.6)}\), thus spawning the idea of controlled, reproductive labour. However, Serena is left outside of the boardroom (1.6) and even lacks authority in her one domain of control: the home. As Offred observes through inner dialogue, ‘beyond the Commander’s door is a place no women go, even Serena Joy. What male totems are kept in there?’ (1.2). Although

\(^{10}\) The Sons of Jacob are the conspiratorial group who devised the ideology and social structure for the Republic of Gilead as well as orchestrating the downfall of the United States Congress.
Serena attests to a woman’s place being in the home, she is inevitably under the direct control and restraint of her husband as all women are without power in Gilead, even if it appears to be directed towards other women, it still remains superficial.

“Nolite te Bastardes Caborundorum: don’t let the bastards grind you down”
The social preoccupation with the health and well-being of women coincides with a desire to surveil, monitor and critique how women conform to their biological expectation of reproduction. Although this “biological expectation” seems outdated due to the increased choices afforded to women to focus on a career, utilise alternate sources of reproduction or the lessening stigma associated with single womanhood, there is a simultaneous media obsession with motherhood, with Elizabeth Podnieks (2012:3) arguing that mothers are ‘back in Vogue’. The emergence of terms such as “yummy mummy”, referring to ‘an attractive, confident, and well-groomed or expectant mother or a woman who manages to glide through pregnancy and motherhood with the style and composure she possessed pre-conception’ (Anderson and Moore, 2014: 98) and acronyms such as “MILF” (Mum I’d Like to Fuck), infers a newfound desire and sex-appeal towards mothers that, like the celebrity mother, is ‘predicated on a degree of considerable economic privilege and is an inherently (middle-) classed concept’ (Anderson and Moore, 2014: 99).

The Commanders of Gilead critique the commodification of contemporary motherhood, calling for a return to traditional values by arguing that women have been corrupted by “raunch culture” (Levy, 2005). I previously examined this in Chapter One, where Waterford degrades the images of female models in the now contraband magazines, calling them ‘zoo animals’ (1.5) and further chastising women for straying from their “biological destiny” by choosing a career over motherhood. The foundation of Gilead opposes avid consumerism instead, opting for minimalist uniformity in order to maintain control and limit independent thinking. In
Episode 6, a flashback shows the Guardians rounding up all personal possessions of the families such as clothing, toys and books, which once littered on the street, provide a stark visual contrast to the dull, muted tones of Gilead. The scene cuts to Serena Joy carrying out a box to the footpath, the camera then focuses in to reveal her own published manifesto “A Woman’s Place” at the forefront, flanked by a pair of heels and the fictional feminist texts, “A Fleeting Affair” and “Women Who Run Things”. By disposing of her novel, Serena’s passion, values and vision for domestic feminism are literally and symbolically annihilated, forcing her to take out her internalised frustrations on the Handmaids who she resents yet depends on at the same time.

After Serena banishes Offred to her room for thirteen days, leaving the ‘[door] unlocked, it can’t even close the whole way, a constant reminder of who is in charge’ (1.4), Offred discovers a broken Latin phrase, ‘Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum’ (1.4) etched into the wardrobe: ‘Was it Offred? The one who was here before? It’s a message for me’. Although it is revealed the mock-Latin aphorism translates to ‘don’t let the bastards grind you down’ (1.6), Offred uses this as a personal war-cry and often returns to the etching as a way of finding solace and support, ‘how did you survive her [Serena Joy]? Please talk to me’ (1.6). Serena callously punishes Offred and the Offred who came before, as a way of coping with the pain of her own infertility and greater oppression under the patriarchal government she helped to devise. Alice E. Adams notes that ‘within the Wives class, women are reproductive consumers, competing with one another for access to the scarcest commodity: children. Handmaids, as reproductive labourers, also compete among themselves to produce children for the market’ (1994: 107). While the Wives are encouraged to become ‘one flower’ (1.4) with the Handmaids, they are constantly reminded of their own barren soil that can only be fertilised figuratively through the co-option of the Handmaids bodies.
The motif of flowers is used throughout the series to reflect not only the centralisation of reproduction, but also to symbolise the impermanence of women’s bodies remaining fertile. Such motifs embody the ‘anxiety-producing tropes circulated in popular media’ such as the ‘appearance of biological clock metaphors’ (Lotz 2001: 108), that instil in women a constant fear of being unable to have families if delayed for too long. Furthermore, Serena is often depicted tending to her garden (1.5) and decorating the house with fresh floral arrangements in order to mask her own withering sexuality (Rubenstein, 1988: 106). In the episode titled “Late”, Serena leaves two white roses on the kitchen table, prematurely believing Offred to be pregnant. Offred recognises that ‘a rose is a rose, except here it has to mean something’ (1.3) thus, playing on Gertrude Stein’s law of identity that “things are what they are”11 however, the presence of a rose in Gilead signifies something greater. The two roses symbolise the shared bond between Serena and Offred as they embark on the journey of motherhood together, while the choice of a white rose connotes the innocence and purity that a child offers being the only potential for salvation, amongst a dying world. However, Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1997: 168) suggests, in this dystopia, ‘all women are oppressed, and any “impetus to challenge” is contained by coercive prontalism and the tightly controlled division (and repression) of reproductive and nurturant labour’ that interlocks the Wives and Handmaids in a constant power-play, where their dependency on one another becomes crucial for survival amongst a patriarchal regime.

A Woman’s Place
*The Handmaid’s Tale* is saturated with symbolism in order to visually hierarchise the women in a class-based system whilst masking individuality at the same time. Invoking Foucault’s notion of bio-power, Gilead controls individual and collective practices and conduct in order

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11 As first cited in Stein’s “Sacred Emily” (1913)
to rationalise their commitment to the nation through repetitive ritualisations and uniformity within social classes. As Foucault (1978: 144) states, ‘a normalising society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life’ and through such normalising practices, the moral imperative for reproduction is re-centred amongst this subset of society.

This is made even more apparent through such class-based divisions and the normalisation of uniforms, which position women as prisoners in the reproductive labour-camp. Furthermore, ‘to put it in Foucauldian terms, female bodies have undergone a strong bio-political asujettissement (subordination, domination)’ (Gualardo, 2016: 120, original emphasis) that has been overtly heightened in Gilead, acting as a mirror to the subtle, yet intense preoccupation placed upon women’s bodies by the media in “bouncing back” to a sexually desired figure after motherhood.

While the men are dressed in black to symbolise their strength, power and authority in Gilead, the women are forced to renounce their sexuality and their bodies are cloaked in order to remain pure and obscure the wandering eyes of men. In a flashback sequence in Episode 1, the newly recruited Handmaids are circled around Janine (who later becomes Ofgren) who tells the traumatic story of being gang raped. In a display of dramatic irony, the fellow Handmaids are forced to point at Janine, chanting ‘her fault’ and ‘teach her a lesson’ (1.1), despite knowing Janine has become subject to the cruel victim blaming synonymous with rape culture. The Handmaid’s Tale thus, critiques the demonisation of women’s bodies in rape culture, where a victim can be branded as “asking for it” based on her appearance. As such, the Commanders remove any individuality by designating the women in a class-based system with assigned colours that reflects their position in the reproductive order: The Handmaids in red, The Wives in blue, the Marthas, the older women who are domestic servants for the Commander’s homes,
are dressed in green, and the Aunts who help coach the Handmaids in the training facilities known as the “Red Centre”, are dressed in brown as a reflection of their quasi-military role. The visual identification and separation of women in a class-based system, is emblematic of the triangle badges sewn onto Nazi concentration camp prisoners, where different colours would signify their status for example, the colour pink was used to identify homosexual men and sexual offenders while red was used for political prisoners, socialists and communists. Despite this ostracisation, the Handmaids band together and seek solidarity through their shared experience, as Offred states in a voice-over ‘It’s their own fault. They should never have given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army’ (1.10)

The long, red dresses that cover every inch of the Handmaid’s bodies provide a visual oxymoron; while they are modestly covered, the vibrant red clothing comes to symbolise passion and lust as the Handmaids are designed for adultery, yet innocently shrouded under a guise of religious necessity. While red can also be associated with the obsession over the Handmaids’ cycle of menstrual blood and the womb, it can also reflect the extreme acts of violence that only intensify as the season goes on. However, despite the extreme efforts to suppress their sexual desires, the men are presented as being lustful, engaging in illicit affairs with their own Handmaids as seen when Janine comments on the ‘weird sexual acts’ (1.9) she was forced to conduct with Commander Putnam. Furthermore, Episode 8, titled “Jezebels”, named after the Biblical Queen who encouraged idolatry and the corresponding name of the underground sex haven used by the Commanders and other high-profile officials where they ‘turn a blind eye [as] everyone is human after all’ (1.8). Gileadean men are depicted as having no self-control over their sexual desires and The Handmaid’s Tale critiques the irony of using religion as a way of enforcing moral authority. For example, when discussing how to gain the support of the Wives through the ritualised rape between the Handmaids and the Commanders,
one states ‘how about we use the term “Ceremony” instead of a [sexual] act?’ ‘yes, that’s nice and Godly, the wives would eat that shit up’ (1.8). As Roberta Rubsenstein (1998: 111) examines in Gilead, ‘the “forbidden” is accommodated, but only to serve traditional assumptions about male, not female, sexuality’ thereby reiterating how every subset of the current society is dominated by a patriarchal ordinance.

In Episode 6 fittingly titled “A Woman’s Place”, the Handmaids are seen scrubbing blood from the walls where bodies had been hanging prior, masking the scent of death and violence for the visiting diplomats who have come to ‘trade chocolate…for Handmaids’ (1.6) In a time-lapse sequence, the blood is slowly washed away, transitioning into an extreme close-up of the key protagonist, Offred, bathing amongst red-tinged water. Soon after, Serena provides Offred with a formal dress for her meeting with the Mexican Ambassador, to which Offred ironically replies, ‘red is my colour’ (1.6). In an almost parodical scene, the camera pans to Serena’s wardrobe revealing a small collection of blue dresses in delicate fabrics and feminine designs. Despite her esteemed position within the Gileadean hierarchy, Serena is like Offred, reduced to a life of conformity and repetition. The Wives’ blue clothing symbolise their association with the purity of Mary, the mother of God, embodying the good, self-sacrificing and most importantly, chaste mother that the Wives come to mirror through their pseudo-conception. These parallel scenes work to highlight the collective experience of oppression shared by the women of Gilead. Although there are obvious power dynamics and hierarchies within the female classes, the series upholds Rich’s (1976: 57, own emphasis added) definition of patriarchy:

A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct, pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the
female is everywhere subsumed under the male.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* presents the extreme oppression of women across these varying and intersecting axes of society as a way of examining how the institution of motherhood ‘serves the interests of patriarchy’ (Rich, 1976: 45), using a dystopian lens to explore how cultural constructions of the New Momism encourage domestic retreatism, self-surveillance and collective anxieties about the achievement of “good” mothering. Connecting back to the episode, “A Woman’s Place” is also the title of Serena Joy’s book on domestic feminism, an example of the retreatism tactics and the desire to return to traditional values that form the core of Gileadean ideology. The Mexican Ambassador asks Serena if back when she was advocating for women to submit to their “biological destiny” as mothers, ‘did you ever imagine a society like this?’ to which Serena replies, ‘a society which has reduced carbon omissions by 70% in three years?’ and in response, ‘a society where women can no longer read your book? Or anything else’ (1.4). This striking question renders the room silent as they process the gravity of their situation: that women are all prisoners to the home and their husbands and/or Commanders.

As Vanessa Reimar suggests ‘nationalist discourse calls upon women to sacrifice their bodies, needs, and desires in order to perform motherhood for the sake of the nation, and it is women’s collective duty to reproduce desirable citizens for the future’ (2014: 286) thus, preserving the myth of ‘ethnic “purity” by giving birth to the “right” kind of children’ (Reimar, 2014: 286). In this case, the “right” kind of children are those who continue to uphold the dichotomy of male as oppressor and female as oppressed thus, perpetuating the division of reproductive labour as ‘the family, as we know, has only ever succeeded through a gendered and generational exercise of power under which some members flourish and others are exploited’ (Garrett et al. 2016: ix). However, through this oppression lies an avenue for hope and
resistance that resides in the Handmaids’ reclamation of their pre-Gileadean names and identities. I will now examine how this gesture provides the Handmaids with a sense of empowerment outside of their reduced identities as reproductive servants.

**What’s in a name?**
In Episode 6, Commander Waterford explains that the Handmaids take patronymics derived from the head of their household to symbolise their sacred and privileged position as fertile women reproducing for the nation. Roberta Rubenstein (1988: 103) unpacks the novel’s original choice to call the protagonist Offred, suggesting her ‘name encodes her indentured sexuality: both “offered” and the property “Of-Fred”’. The pronoun “of” connotes the Handmaids’ ownership by the Commanders they are assigned to, as well as representing their lack of individualism by denouncing them of the birth name.

The interchangeable nature of the Handmaids as reproductive vessels is evident when Aunt Lydia tells Ofwarren, ‘you are Ofdaniel now’ (1.9) and calls upon her to ‘go with them and be blessed. Go to them like an open flower’ as if she is once again, virginal. Moreover, the women are all branded with serial identifiers and tracking devices affixed to their ears like livestock, a further act of dehumanisation similar to the identification tattoos of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. For example, in the court-room scene in Episode 3, Ofglen and the Martha she was having an affair with, are impersonally identified as ‘Martha 6750671’ and ‘Handmaid 8967’ (1.3). Throughout the course of the series, the technique of inner dialogue is used to reaffirm Offred’s connection to her pre-Gileadean identity, ‘I have to survive for her. Her name is Hanna, my husband is Luke, my name is June’ (1.1).

Over time, Offred learns to present an acceptable facade and integrate the expectations of Gilead into her everyday behaviour in order to preserve her survival. Offred understands the
power in utilising her name as a form of resistance with the potential to shatter their subjugated identities, ‘don’t call me that. It’s not my name. It’s June. My name is June’ (1.7). In the final episode, Offred reads out hundreds of letters written by the other Handmaids, detailing the abuse they have suffered, ‘we are prisoners, they rape us, they treat us like animals’ (1.8). Although collective pronouns are employed to demonstrate the experience of trauma shared between these women, one thing that remains singular is the repetition of ‘my name is…’ as a way of reaffirming how these stories have been individually afflicted. These personal testimonies are victim statements, reflecting *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s ability to make the personal political. By highlighting how women’s experiences of trauma can be felt both collectively and also made more palpable through individualisation, the series transposes the Handmaids’ experiences onto the female viewership.

Although the dystopian setting dramatises the extremes of patriarchal oppression, it also enables the series to exposes the intense practices of surveillance and monitoring that are generated by societal pressures to reproduce, retreat to the domestic sphere and conform to an expected ideal of “good” mothering. However, the resistance of the female characters reminds viewers to not let ‘the bastards grind you down’ (1.4) and to remember that yes, we are mothers, but we are also so much more.
Conclusion

Amidst the pressures of the New Momism and the postfeminist trope of “having it all”, contemporary motherhood incites a constant state of monitoring, self-surveillance and anxiety that forces women to adhere to certain expectations about “good” mothering making it the ‘ultimate female Olympics’ (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 6). As McRobbie argues (qtd in Meyer et al. 2016: 192), ‘the age of online communication forces women into a “mode of repetitive looking”’, enabling parenting practices to be informally regulated and for the media at large, to disseminate images of mothering practices deemed inadequate or successful. While the media and more specifically, televisual texts, play a key role in enforcing and coding such behaviours, it is important to note that popular culture is not an exact mirror of everyday life, consumed by passive audiences. It is, as I have argued, a space in which the socio-political context of the time can be reimagined and challenged, providing a platform to “speak back to” and transgress traditional representations of motherhood on screen.

In this thesis I have examined how two television texts of polar-opposite genres, The Handmaid’s Tale and Big Little Lies, explore the lived reality of trauma as a part of the female experience, exacerbated by current threats to female sexual autonomy and the intensification of motherhood as an area of political and social concern. By using Adrienne Rich’s analysis of motherhood as a patriarchal institution (1976), the first chapter explores how female characters in both texts, grapple with their conflicting identities as mothers and the ability for both love and anger to coexist in the mothering experience, while the latter two chapters were analysed separately in order to honour stylistic textual differences.

On the surface, Big Little Lies appears to be a HBO drama centred around the lives of five beautiful, middle-class women battling out on the schoolyard to claim the award for best
mother in Monterey. However, what unravels is a world of domestic abuse, single-mother stigmatisation, the demonisation of working mothers, the nuances of violence and the absorption of parental characteristics onto children all of which reflect the ‘dark cycle of anxiety, guilt and resentment that recurs insistently in accounts of modern motherhood’ (Garrett et al. 2016: xii). Whilst “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) has developed into “intensive parenting” (Lee et al, 2014), and traditional family dynamics are evolving in order to make way for shared parenting duties and non-normative family households, Lynn O’Brien Hallstein (2014: 297) suggests mothers are experiencing a collective double-bind, split between newfound gains in the public sphere as unencumbered women (women without children) and old gender-based, oppressive family-life roles in the private sphere that continue to place primary responsibility for child-rearing and care on women after they become mothers.

Speaking at the 2017 Emmy’s, Laura Dern, the actress who plays Renata in Big Little Lies exclaimed she was ‘very proud to be part of reflecting fierce women and mothers, finding their voice’ (Big Little Lies, HBO 2017) thereby alluding to the transformative capabilities of television to emerge within, and speak back to, the cultural climate in which it is produced. Dern’s further separation of “women” and “mother” breaks through the homogenising claim that woman equals mother, but ‘before we were mothers, we have been, first of all, women, with actual bodies and actual minds’ (Rich, 1976: 193), we are one in the same, yet composed of distinct and complex entities and contemporary televisual texts have the opportunity to critically address and challenge, these feminine entanglements.

In light of recent events in the United States regarding the election of Brett Kavanaugh, a conservative ideologue appointed by President Trump, to the life-long position of Associate
Justice of the Supreme Court, the message of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has never resonated more with those concerned about the future of abortion rights, reproductive control and sexual autonomy. After being accused of sexually assaulting Dr. Christine Blasey Ford in 1982 and still garnering the support of the Republican Party, Kavanaugh’s case presents ‘the perfect emblem for the politics of Trump, where the real victims of racism and sexism are old white men with a predilection for sexual harassment, assault and infidelity’ (Wolffe, 2018). The reciprocal relationship between life and art is unfolding as we speak, women are dressing up in the red, puritan costumes of the Handmaids all across America in a sign of protest against the growing likeness to the nation’s political allegiance with the theocratic, conservative government of Gilead.

Although a dystopian drama, *The Handmaid’s Tale* speaks to the sexual politics of the context in which it has emerged, where a renewed desire for women to retreat to the private sphere coincides with growing fantasies of patriarchal protection and the social and political regulation of the female body. Stuart Murray (2012: 377) suggests that ‘we are called, historically, to assume responsibility not just for ourselves, but also as actors who must look both backwards and forwards in time, and whose actions form part of a vital link in those histories that were and that will be’. One of those actions is to write about the experiences of contemporary motherhood, its transgressions, anxieties, retreatist tactics and nationalist concern as dramatised through two televisual texts.

There is a need for further work on the transgressive representations of contemporary motherhood in popular culture and the role of televisual texts in particular, as potential purveyors of social change and commentary. The growing influence of women in the creation of cultural texts allows for a shift in the limited narrative via which femininity has been
traditionally imagined and conveyed. Reese Witherspoon (Madeline, *Big Little Lies*), Nicole Kidman (Celeste, *Big Little Lies*) and Elisabeth Moss (Offred/June, *The Handmaid’s Tale*) are each central characters and executive producers of their respective shows and both original authors, Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, 1985) and Liane Moriarty (*Big Little Lies*, 2014) are consulting producers. This reciprocal relationship between writer, producer and actress imbues each text with authenticity as these feminine entanglements with motherhood become narrativised through a collective, nuanced female voice.

With both shows in their second season, *The Handmaid’s Tale* having already aired in 2018 and *Big Little Lies* to follow suit in 2019, I believe the cultural impact of these texts to be still in their infancy. By presenting motherhood as a complex and conflicting identity, the female characters in both shows remind viewers that ‘it is not enough to let our children go; we need selves of our own to return to’ (Rich, 1976: 37).
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