



ON *BIG LITTLE LIES*
AND NETWORKS OF TRAUMA

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I'm supposed to be writing about Harun Farocki, but last night I binge-watched the first season of *Big Little Lies*, HBO's television drama about wealthy Californians embroiled in a murder mystery, and now it's all I can think about. I watched all seven episodes with my mom, drinking wine on a velvet couch, on my last night of spring break and into this morning. I didn't expect or even really want to like the show — it stars Reese Witherspoon, for one thing, and for another it follows a gang of white women to coffee shops and yoga classes and after-school pick-up lines in their luxe, oceanfront sliver of Monterey. I was content to keep watching *Atlanta* and wait for the next season of *Westworld*. But I watched *Big Little Lies*, anyway — mostly because my mom wanted to, the Stormy Daniels interview on CNN had just ended, and there was nothing else on TV.

Big Little Lies doesn't have much in common with *The Wire*, another HBO drama series, but one thing they do share is an interest in mapping the networked, institutional or quasi-institutional forms that make things like abuses of power or systemic violence in their respective worlds possible. Whereas *The Wire* charts nodes in the drug trade

and law enforcement (and more) in Baltimore circa the early 2000s, *Big Little Lies* takes up the social infrastructure of a sub-community of contemporary Monterey.¹ It builds a network out of glances, pointed fingers, confessions, bruises, and other signifiers.

Earlier this morning, I sat at the kitchen counter and read reviews of *Big Little Lies* on my phone while my mom made coffee. Being home made me think about the secret lives that surrounded me in this suburban space while I was growing up — many of which resembled, in certain ways, those of characters on the show. I was particularly moved by Nicole Kidman's portrayal of Celeste, the beautiful, somewhat glacial housewife whose husband hits her. Kidman is particularly good at creating a whole language out of eye movements while her character says nothing about the abuse to her friends. In one scene in the first episode of the season, Jane (Shailene Woodley), the new, younger mom from Santa Cruz, says she feels like she's "on the outside looking in" at a life that doesn't quite belong to her. Madeline (Reese Witherspoon) looks flummoxed, but Celeste stares at Jane in a way that clearly communicates recognition. The moment resonates without having a fixed meaning; we do not yet know that Jane is haunted by memories of rape, nor that Celeste lives with domestic violence. In the climactic moment of the season finale, Celeste gives Jane a similar look, when she realizes that their abusers are in fact the same person.

The show is notable for how much of it plays out in

silence. Besides moments in which relationships are communicated through glances and sight lines (often in contrast to what is spoken), there's the silence of trauma resurfacing. Both Celeste and Jane are visited by traumatic memories, but these are rarely represented as fully immersive flashbacks. Instead, at its best, the show portrays them as fragmented, without sound, triggered by some event in the diegetic present (such as when Celeste smells one of her son's stuffed animals, and remembers a moment of abuse in which the toy was nearby) with which they maintain sonic continuity. In this way, the scenes mimic (in my judgment, anyway) aspects of the subjective experience of re-lived trauma.

The final episode of the first season of *Big Little Lies* opens with a shot of an air-conditioning vent and the clicking sound of video game controllers being manipulated. As the camera zooms in, we hear muffled yelping and crashing, presumably from behind the vent. Cut to Celeste on the bathroom floor, gasping: the aftermath of another beating from Perry. This time, she doesn't fight back. Eventually, one of the boys calls from the hall to say that it's time to go to school, and Perry rushes over, blocking their son from seeing Celeste. The episode, according to the version of the script I read, wasn't supposed to begin this way — but it's a testament to the skill of the show's editors that it does. It sets us up for the revelation that Celeste's son Max is the one hurting Amabella, later in the episode. Because we can hear Celeste being beaten from the other room, we know the boys can, too.

Another thematic silence is the children's refusal to name the classroom bully. In two scenes in the season's first and last episodes that mirror each other, Amabella and Ziggy are each asked to name the bully — and when they can't, to point to them instead. In the first instance, the teacher suggests that Amabella's inability to name her abuser is due to the fact that the students don't yet know one another's names. But in reality, Amabella is scared; she's been threatened. "Little boys don't get to go around anymore hurting little girls," says her mother, Renata (Laura Dern), kneeling in a circle of parents and their children after the first day of school. Because Celeste and Amabella's bruises are compared to each other over the course of the show, commentators have pointed out that this line is meant to beg a different question: *What about big boys?*

Television doesn't exist in a vacuum. Eight months after *Big Little Lies* premiered, two exposés published by the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* detailed multiple allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Harvey Weinstein, one of Hollywood's most powerful producers. More generally, 2017 was the year of the Women's March, Time's Up and #MeToo, the year Sen. Elizabeth Warren was silenced on the Senate floor using a little-known rule by her predominantly male colleagues, inadvertently sparking a meme of feminist resistance. "Most of us were taught not to tattle," said Laura Dern at the Golden Globes, in her acceptance speech for the Best Supporting Actress in a Limited Series award for

her role as Renata. "It was a culture of silencing and that was normalized." This line, so similar to the one her character delivers on the show, takes on new significance at the mass cultural level in light of the events of the intervening year.

Is *Big Little Lies* an essentially liberatory or apologetic show? A boring answer but a truthful one is that it depends what barometer you use, but probably both. Many of the facts surrounding the way the show came into being seem to speak tepidly in its favor. At last year's Emmys, Kidman said that she and Witherspoon optioned the book from Liane Moriarty at least in part because they weren't getting the kinds of roles they wanted, and so used it as an opportunity to create roles for themselves and their friends. They were also able to make certain executive decisions, including whether the adaptation should be a movie or television show, and who the writer and director would be (David E. Kelley and Jean-Marc Vallée). (Personally I think David E. Kelley was the more questionable choice, but it worked out in the end. Everyone who worked on the show seems to think Jean-Marc Vallée is a genius, and I tend to agree; among other things, he's responsible for casting Zoë Kravitz, which speaks in his favor. According to press statements, he's too busy to shoot the second season, and so Andrea Arnold, who directed several episodes of *Transparent*, will take the helm, which I'm excited for.)

Execution

The flip side is that Witherspoon and Kidman are very much insiders, and the social networks they drew upon to make hiring decisions reflect this. One of the structuring diegetic forces that the show does not take up much in its first season is race. *Big Little Lies* is a very white show; Bonnie, played by Zoë Kravitz, is the only main character of color (not including the homicide detective and members of the chorus). One of the few times this assumptive whiteness is gestured at is in the scene in which Madeline, Bonnie, and their husbands are all having dinner, and Madeline wants to know what music Bonnie is playing. "Is this Adele?" She asks blithely. "No, it's Sade," replies Bonnie. At first, I thought that the whiteness of Monterey (which is actually mostly Hispanic) was itself an object of criticism.²

But the more I read about the show's production history, the more it seemed like Madeline, Celeste, Renata, and Jane are white simply because Witherspoon and Kidman are, and so is their social network; they called Laura Dern, who got Shailene Woodley, her best friend, involved. My cynical side suspects that the chorus — which feels weirdly out of sync in terms of diversity with the central characters and their husbands — was cast the way it was more or less to add color. This aspect of the show's production history feels reflective of larger conversations around ways in which black and brown women are often erased or overlooked by mainstream feminist movements that rely on social networks

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(Tarana Burke as the originator of Me Too, the selective outrage of Women Boycott Twitter), and moreover ways in which mainstream feminism often fails to be inclusive.

Over the years, television has come up with a variety of framing devices for providing narrative reflection and analysis. In *The Sopranos*, it was Tony's therapy sessions with his psychiatrist. *True Detective*, a show I disliked, used the police interrogation. *Big Little Lies* makes use of both these devices: detective interviews with the "Greek chorus" of neighbors in the aftermath of the murder, and, later in the season, counseling sessions between Celeste and her therapist. One thing the chorus does is to introduce dramatic irony through an unreliable narrator. Another is to bring out something about how information travels and is obscured in Monterey. Gossip in a small, suburban community can form a system as complex as any government intelligence network; Celeste's reluctance to leave her husband and Jane's distress over her son being named the classroom bully are rendered plausible by the chorus, whose members relentlessly reinforce the idea that, in their town, image is everything, and has felt consequences on social standing and influence. (In one scene, Renata adopts the chorus' perspective to respond to her husband's suggestion that they skip the fundraiser: "*What, the rich people, they spend their money, but they don't have the wherewithal to even show up and invest their time?* That's not gonna

work," she tells him. Seconds earlier, she jokes, "If I get shot in the head tonight, half these moms are gonna say, *She couldn't bother herself to duck?*") Moreover, the chorus demonstrates the way women especially are scrutinized by the community at large — which is why the female protagonists share their most carefully guarded truths with only select trusted women (e.g., Jane confides in Madeline, Madeline in her daughter Abigail, Celeste in Dr. Reisman).

Another thing these framing devices are often used for is to examine the unsettled meaning of some significant event. The unsettled meanings on this show very often have to do with violence, or its intimation. The show is, in a sense, all about acts of aggression, big and small. One example of a small jab occurs when Madeline's ex-husband, Nathan, stops her in the school parking lot to talk about their teenage daughter, Abigail. Before he leaves, he leans over the car window to tell Madeline that Bonnie will be singing at the fundraiser that evening. "She's good," he says. "She's, like, really good." A beat. Then, Chloe, Madeline's younger daughter, quips from the backseat, "Good to know," with more than a hint of sarcasm — showing that even a first-grader can spot an act of passive-aggression.³ To me, the central unsettled meaning of *Big Little Lies* is not the murder per se, but the moments of violence that unfold in Celeste and Perry's relationship. In this respect, the scenes between Celeste and Dr. Reisman are particularly powerful because they show Celeste navigating between speech and silence,

running up against the blockages that make it difficult for her to see his behavior for what it is, and, eventually, finding the language to do so, when she confronts him in the car before the fundraiser.

Is there something revolutionary about showing these kinds of everyday, often gendered, power struggles, in and of itself? Certainly many viewers found the portrayal prescient and relatable, even if they didn't live on the seaside in multimillion-dollar homes. Both Witherspoon and Kidman have remarked that they've never had this kind of a reaction to a performance before: people coming up to them at Starbucks or on the street and wanting to talk about the show, to analyze the characters.⁴ Additionally, the fact that so many male critics panned the show (Mark Hale, writing for the *New York Times*, compared *BLL* to *Desperate Housewives* and, more problematically, *Fifty Shades of Grey*) while so many female critics loved it seems to indicate that it's doing something innovative and even subversive.

One thing that's become clear, between Alyssa Milano's tweet and Oprah Winfrey's speech at the Golden Globes, is that celebrities do have the power to crystallize powerful messages for mass audiences and get those messages heard. In her Golden Globe acceptance speech, Dern followed the mention of the culture of silence with a call to action: "I urge all of us to not only support survivors and bystanders who are brave enough to tell their truth, but to promote restorative justice." I've spent the past

year or so thinking and learning about restorative and transformative justice, for reasons beyond the scope of this essay, and the kinds of communities needed to support them. In some ways I feel like they leverage the same social infrastructures that allow harm to happen, but reconfigured and mobilized to heal it.

But first, people must be able to speak their truths. Sometimes this requires removing the fear of retribution that prevents them from doing so. Sometimes it requires removing economic or social obstacles that make doing so seem an impossibility.⁵

Before I moved to Chicago, eight years ago this summer, the last thing of significance that occurred was that I got a call from my dad, asking if I'd heard what happened. The father of my first serious boyfriend had come home the day before and shot his wife in the face before killing himself in their garage. It was a dramatic ending to what had been a long and painful history of abuse, one that had affected my boyfriend and his family, and, in a much less enduring and physical way, me. (My boyfriend often said, "I'd never hurt you," which to him meant, "I'd never hit you," but there are, of course, many ways to hurt people, and certainly to manipulate them.) (His mother, like Celeste, drew her own boundaries; for her, it was that her husband couldn't hit their daughters. When he eventually did, she tried to leave him. Like Perry, he couldn't bear it, and became terminally violent.) It took me a long time to understand that love didn't have to be volatile, relationships weren't zero-sum,

and sex wasn't currency to placate someone. I thought about this this morning, after I kissed my mom goodbye and started driving, past houses I've seen a million times before, with their big front yards and stoop lights glowing, all looking serene and peaceful in the morning mist.



Figures



Figure 7 *Big Little Lies*. "Somebody's Dead." Season 1, Episode 1. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. Written for television by David E. Kelley. (Left insert: "You Get What You Need." Season 1, Episode 7.)



Figure 8 *Big Little Lies*. "Once Bitten." Season 1, Episode 5. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. Written for television by David E. Kelley.

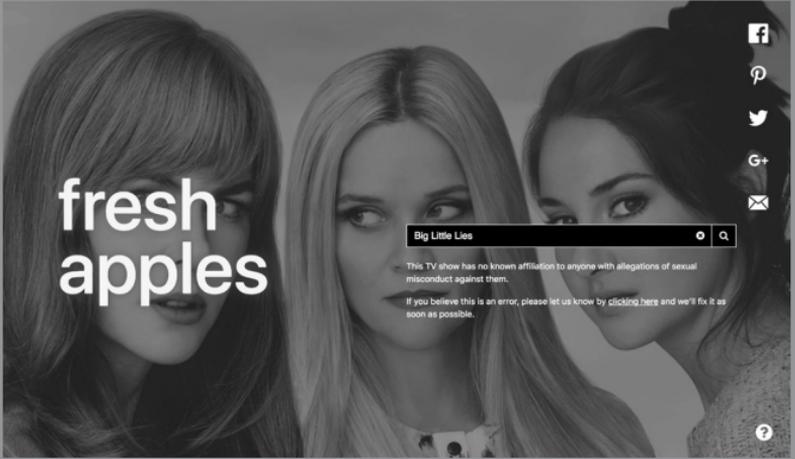


Figure 9 Screenshot from Rotten Apples, therottenappl.es, a website that quickly tells you whether a movie or television show has "connections to someone with allegations of sexual misconduct." Accessed April 2018.

Notes

(1).....For a fuller analysis of *The Wire* from this perspective, see Patrick Jagoda, "Wired," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 2012): 189–99. For an introduction to this method of analysis more generally, see Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

(2).....Zeba Blay, writing for the *Huffington Post*, acknowledges the show's flawed portrayal of Bonnie, but suggests that, by showing Bonnie navigating the mostly lilywhite world of the show's version of Monterey — in which race is never mentioned — *Big Little Lies* successfully brings out something about the way racism works in many white, liberal communities: masquerading as color blindness while manifesting in microaggressions. See Zeba Blay, "Bonnie and the Brilliant Racial Tension of 'Big Little Lies,'" *Huffington Post*, April 5, 2017.

(3).....The show is full of small acts of aggression — some of which serve as red herrings for the audience as it tries to predict who is behind larger acts of violence. In the final episode of the season, Renata's husband, Gordon, confronts Jane at the cafe in an attempt to intimidate her; the cafe owner, Tom, asks him to leave. Later, at the fundraiser, Tom raises a glass in Gordon's direction in an attempt at reconciliation; in response, Gordon raises his hand and slowly fires a finger-pistol at Tom. Because we know someone will be dead by the night's end, this gesture feels particularly ominous.

(4).....See, for instance, Patricia Garcia, "Reese Witherspoon on Who She Initially Wanted to Play on *Big Little Lies* — and What She Thinks About Those Critics Who Dismiss the Show as Just Another Soap Opera," *Vogue*, March 29, 2017.

(5).....As Winfrey said at the Golden Globes, many women endure years of abuse and assault because they have "children to feed and bills to pay and dreams to pursue."