

Reese Witherspoon's popular feminism: adaptation and authorship in *Big Little Lies*

Sarah Louise Smyth

To cite this article: Sarah Louise Smyth (2024) Reese Witherspoon's popular feminism: adaptation and authorship in *Big Little Lies*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 22:1, 296-315, DOI: [10.1080/17400309.2023.2263690](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2263690)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2263690>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 28 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 528




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Reese Witherspoon's popular feminism: adaptation and authorship in *Big Little Lies*

Sarah Louise Smyth 

Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

ABSTRACT


Through her programmes, including *Big Little Lies* (2017–2019), *The Morning Show* (2019–), and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), Reese Witherspoon has been central to the recent rise of women-centric television. Witherspoon's media company, Hello Sunshine, and her book club, Reese's Book Club, aim to 'shine a light' on women's work, vocalising an explicitly feminist approach to authorship and adaptation. Identifying Witherspoon's politics as a form of popular feminism, this article uses *Big Little Lies* (*BLL*) as a case study to investigate the various strategies Witherspoon and Hello Sunshine deploy to articulate this feminism. Identifying sisterhood as a key strategy, this article points to the limits of popular feminism by revealing who is excluded from this female collective: director Andrea Arnold, whose creative control was allegedly undermined when directing *BLL*'s second season; and *BLL*'s Black female characters, who are narratively excluded from this construction. This article, then, calls for feminist critics to be attentive to the selective and exclusionary nature of popular feminism in television as it obscures the material conditions of women working in television production roles and the sexist and racist structures governing women's representations.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 4 September 2023; Accepted 19 September 2023

KEYWORDS *Big Little Lies*; Reese Witherspoon; Hello Sunshine; Andrea Arnold; popular feminism; HBO

Introduction

Reese Witherspoon is central to the recent rise of women-centric television. Through her media company, Hello Sunshine, she has produced (and sometimes starred in) a number of high-profile women-led shows including *Big Little Lies* (2017–2019), *The Morning Show* (2019–), *Truth Be Told* (2019–2023), *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), *Surface* (2022–), *Daisy Jones & the Six* (2023), *Tiny Beautiful Things* (2023) and *The Last Thing He Told Me* (2023).¹ Witherspoon and Hello Sunshine make explicit appeals to feminism as they aim to 'put women at the center of every

CONTACT Sarah Louise Smyth  sarah.smyth@essex.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

story we create, celebrate and discover' and to produce 'content for women across platforms, starring strong female characters, written and produced by women' (Boorstin 2018). Authorship is key to Witherspoon's feminist efforts. As stated on its website, Hello Sunshine aims to 'empower women by giving them authorship, inspiring agency, and creating a platform to help them shape culture and the world around them'. This encompasses literary authorship and adaptation, as Witherspoon hosts a book club via an online app, dedicated to spotlighting women's fiction and non-fiction – many of which are then adapted for the big or small screen by Hello Sunshine.

This article uses *Big Little Lies* (*BLL*) as a case study to examine Witherspoon's efforts to 'empower women by giving them authorship'. *BLL* has multiple modes of female authorship. The first season was adapted from Liane Moriarty's 2014 novel of the same name. The second season takes the story beyond the novel, although Moriarty wrote an unpublished novella for the show's writer, David E. Kelley (Villarreal 2019), effectively extending the novel's storyworld and Moriarty's authorial presence. *BLL* was executive produced by Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman, who also starred in the show, alongside Laura Dern, Zoë Kravitz, Shailene Woodley and, in the second season, Meryl Streep. Although written by Kelley and directed in its first season by film director Jean-Marc Vallée, it was directed in its second season by acclaimed filmmaker Andrea Arnold and was critically received as a show about women's art (Gray 2017). The show's narrative also addresses women's concerns and was praised for its exploration of domestic abuse and sexual assault (Tolentino 2017; Nussbaum 2017; Mangan 2017), even if a number of male television critics initially dismissed it as frivolous, petty, and melodramatic (Rorke 2017; Hale 2017).

This article complicates Hello Sunshine/Witherspoon's claims to feminism by looking carefully at the discursive modes of authorship at work in *BLL*. I situate Hello Sunshine's brand image within Sarah Banet-Weiser's conception of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018a) – a spectacular and media-friendly feminism, which upholds capitalist and neoliberal logics. Popular feminism, I argue, informs the gendered modes of authorship and adaptation at work in *BLL*. This is especially evident in Witherspoon's deployment of sisterhood across various media, where she claims *BLL*'s production was a collaboration between various female co-authors. In this article, I point to the limits of popular feminism's – and Witherspoon's – intervention in women's authorship and adaptation by examining two instances where women are excluded from this sisterhood: Arnold's alleged loss of creative control when directing *BLL*'s second season; and the narrative exclusion of Black women from this sisterhood through, I argue, the process of adaptation. Popular feminism is selective, highlighting some forms of women's agency, while obscuring others. I use *BLL*'s popular feminism to

demonstrate the need to be critical of the relationship between women's authorship and representation. With women's growing visibility in the era of peak television, we must be attentive to the shifting feminist politics that inform various modes of gendered authorship.

Television's emerging feminism

Recently, there has been a growth in the number of women-led television programmes that articulate a shift in feminist politics. While television has long engaged with feminist themes and women's rights (*I Love Lucy* [1951–1957], *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* [1970–1977], *The Golden Girls* [1985–1992]), recent events such as economic precarity following the 2008 recession, the rise of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, and Donald Trump's presidency and the global growth of right-wing politics have renewed a mainstream feminist activism. This is reflected in a number of women-led television programmes. Narratives in *The Good Wife* (2009–2016), *The Good Fight* (2017–2022), *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), *Veep* (2012–2019) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–) explicitly engage in liberal feminist politics (McNally 2022). Unlike the aspirational postfeminist programmes of the early 2000s such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), and *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), many women-centric shows after the 2008 financial crash express a pessimism towards the promises of postfeminism (Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016; Negra and Tasker 2014). Programmes such as *Girls* (2012–2017), *Broad City* (2014–2019), *Fleabag* (2016–2019), *Insecure* (2016–2021), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), *GLOW* (2017–2019), and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–2019) variously negotiate, subvert, and resist postfeminist representations of femininity (Havas 2022; Levy 2022; Nygaard and Lagerwey 2020; Nash and Whelehan 2017). Precisely how to identify this feminism and the extent to which this is a shift away from postfeminism is still up for debate. Jessica Ford argues that these shows have a 'feminist sensibility' as they 'negotiate and explore feminist politics, ideology and issues in deliberate and distinct ways' (Ford 2019, 929). Elizabeth Alsop, meanwhile, argues that, through this articulation of feminism, these shows recall second-wave feminist discourses, but update it to construct a more 'self-consciously intersectional vision of female solidarity' (Alsop 2019, 1026).

Many critics agree, however, that these shows explicitly feminise the masculine-coding of quality television (Havas 2022; Levy 2022; Pinedo 2021; Nygaard and Lagerwey 2017). Given that quality television is 'premised upon male anti-heroes and the sexist and abusive treatment of women' (Perkins and Schreiber 2019, 920), which is evidenced in *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), *Mad Men* (2007–2015), and *True Detective* (2014–), programmes about women's sexual and domestic abuse in

I May Destroy You (2020), *Sharp Objects* (2018) and *Mare of Easttown* (2021) significantly counter this gendered discourse. In this issue, Jessica Ford persuasively argues that *Sharp Objects* undertakes an affective feminist exploration of feminine trauma and violence. Moreover, these programmes often draw on feminised modes of storytelling, such as melodrama and soap opera (Reinhard 2019), legitimising these often disparaged forms and revitalising television's capacity to represent women's stories. For feminist academics, this is an important reclamation of television studies as a feminised and feminist field, which was so often dismissed as a legitimate object of study due to its association with domesticity, femininity, and mass appeal (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2017; Brunson 1990).

Another central tenet of this emerging feminism is women's authorship. Many female writers and showrunners have emerged within this cycle of women-centric television including Shonda Rhimes, Lena Dunham, Michaela Coel, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Sharon Horgan, Issa Rae, Jenji Kohan, Rachel Bloom, Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson. As Claire Perkins and Michelle Schreiber identify, their programmes can be situated within a broader 'swell of popular discourse [that] is currently recognising women's agency as creators in the "Peak TV" landscape and commending the content they are producing as feminist' (Perkins and Schreiber 2019, 919). Although Perkins and Schreiber celebrate this critical shift in women's television work, they warn that this feminist discourse is limited as it 'frequently reinforces postfeminist ideas around achieved progress for women in media production by working to canonize individual showrunners and those who orbit them' (Perkins and Schreiber 2019, 920). Much of women's television work, especially below-the-line work, remains hidden (Andrews and Arnold 2022; Galt 2020). Moreover, women who are singled out as successful showrunners often struggle to receive the same recognition and prestige as male showrunners as author-function attributes such as 'authority, mastery, and control of fictional universes . . . are highly gendered as masculine in American culture' (Mittell 2015, 104).

It is within this context that I situate Witherspoon's productions. Witherspoon revealed that she founded her media company, Hello Sunshine, after receiving a script with a 'terrible' and 'misogynistic' female role that every actress in Hollywood wanted (Tribbitt 2019). Frustrated by the lack of roles available to women, she founded Hello Sunshine to 'disrupt' the film and television industries (Tribbitt 2019) and green-light more projects with 'strong female characters' (Boorstin 2018). The paucity of roles available to women, especially women over the age of 40, certainly speaks to the ageist sexism of Hollywood (Jermyn 2012). The fact that Witherspoon is one of the most successful and highly paid actors working in Hollywood demonstrates how deeply entrenched this is. Witherspoon's explicit effort to 'put women at the center' of various media is laudable given

the low number of women who are represented in front of and behind the camera in both film and television (Lauzen 2021). Moreover, Witherspoon's shows, especially *BLL*, *The Morning Show* and *Little Fires Everywhere*, have contributed to public discussions around important, yet often neglected, gender issues including sexual harassment, sexual assault, racialised sexism, domestic violence, and motherhood (Garrett 2023; Kim 2022; Banet-Weiser and Claire Higgins 2022; Bautista 2021; Barron 2021; Pinedo 2021).

That being said, in this article, I want to closely examine the kind of feminist politics Witherspoon and *BLL* convey, which I identify as popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018a). Examining Hello Sunshine through popular feminism reveals its efforts as a form of spectacular, performative feminism, which is especially invested in consumer capitalism. I will firstly set out Banet-Weiser's theory of popular feminism, before considering how Hello Sunshine articulates these central logics. I will then use this to contextualise the central discursive strategy used by Witherspoon to communicate her feminism – sisterhood – and the problems this raises in relation to women's authorship and adaptation in *BLL* within a popular feminist context.

Witherspoon's popular feminism

Popular feminism, as defined by Banet-Weiser, is a spectacular, highly visible form of feminism that often circulates through mainstream media, especially social media (Banet-Weiser 2018a). Popular feminism works alongside celebrity and corporate feminism as it upholds capitalist and neoliberal logics, privileging the seeing and purchasing of feminism over critiques of patriarchal structures and systems of racism, violence, and inequality. On the surface, it appears to be a shift away from the dominant discourse of postfeminism. As Angela McRobbie identifies, postfeminism 'positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality has been achieved' (McRobbie 2004, 255). Feminism is not something necessary nor desirable to identify with, and so it becomes largely obscured in mainstream culture. On the other hand, popular feminism – an identification of and with feminism – makes feminism spectacularly visible (Banet-Weiser 2018b, 154). Popular feminism circulates in an 'economy of visibility' (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 10), meaning practices and expressions of popular feminism circulate through media, especially social media, where its sheer accessibility, popularity, and visibility become 'the beginning and end of political action' (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 23). Notably, as Banet-Weiser argues, 'postfeminism and popular feminism are entangled together in contemporary media visibility. Postfeminism remains a dominant, visible iteration of feminism in culture, and is not displaced by it' (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 20). Postfeminism and popular feminism, therefore, are mutually sustaining: they both focus on white, middle-class, Western women; they

are both shaped by the same affective politics of entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, and gumption; and they both link ‘empowerment’ to being a better economic subject, rather than a better feminist subject (Banet-Weiser 2018b, 154–155). In this way, popular feminism coincides with neoliberal feminism as it fails to challenge the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Rottenberg 2018).

Hello Sunshine articulates the logics of popular feminism in two key ways. Firstly, Hello Sunshine’s aim to tell women’s stories is an explicitly commercialist venture. Popular feminism is a corporate-friendly version of feminism, which focuses on adding or including women in existing capitalist structures (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 12). When discussing the implications of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements, Hello Sunshine’s CEO Sarah Harden framed them not as a moment to address the systemic sexual abuse and imbalanced gendered power dynamics in the media industries, but as having raised ‘an awareness of the power of the female consumer’, whose significant spending power was not being tapped into (Boorstin 2018). Hello Sunshine partners with global companies such as Google and P&G to offer brands a ‘unique opportunity to engage women . . . at the intersection of entertainment, storytelling, commerce and community’. In 2021, Hello Sunshine was sold to Candle Media for \$900 million, acquired for its potential in entertainment, technology, and commerce (Lang and Rubin 2021). Witherspoon, the figurehead of Hello Sunshine, frequently discusses her mission to be an ‘agent of change’ in a media industry dominated by men, yet describes herself not as an ‘activist’, but as an ‘artist’ and an ‘entrepreneur’ (Chernikoff 2023). Hello Sunshine is just one of Witherspoon’s commercial ventures – she also founded the clothing and lifestyle brand Draper James and wrote the children’s book *Busy Betty*, about a young girl who turns her excess energy into a dog-washing business.

Witherspoon’s book club also explicitly negotiates feminism and commercialism. As stated on its website, Reese’s Book Club aims to ‘co-author louder, greater, prouder . . . narrative[s] for women’, but does so in an explicitly commercialist setting, with sponsored partners including Google, coffee brand Lavazza, and wine company Simi. Book clubs have a long history as commercialist ventures (Radway 1997), with celebrity book clubs strengthening and complicating this relationship. Oprah Winfrey’s book club, best known as a segment on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* from 1996–2011, represents ‘the complicated interplay among commerce, culture, and self-cultivation within the popular literary’ (Collins 2010, 87). More recently, Emma Watson’s book club, Our Shared Shelf, suggests that celebrity book clubs can offer a form of feminist activism and cultural critique, even if this is negotiated by the celebrity’s star image and discourses of performance and authenticity (Haastrup 2018). Reese’s Book Club takes this a step further by

also adapting some of the popular women-authored book club picks into women-led films or television shows. These include *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022), *The Last Thing He Told Me* (2023), *Daisy Jones & the Six* (2023), *Something in the Water* (in development), *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (in development), and *Truly Madly Guilty* (optioned). I will discuss the feminist politics of adaptation later in this essay. For now, situating this in the current industrial landscape where film and television are dependent on existing intellectual properties and pre-sold audiences (Lavigne 2014), Hello Sunshine's business model draws on Witherspoon's celebrity to reassure audiences of the content's quality and accessible feminism, and create an intimate and loyal book club audience who both read the books and watch the screen adaptations. Following popular feminism's logic of 'tak[ing] up women's issues, especially those that have to do with individual consumption habits, as a key selling point for products' (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 12–13), Hello Sunshine turns women's adaptation into an explicitly commercialist industrial practice, consolidating Witherspoon's business interests, monetising women's voices and stories, and selling these back to women.

Secondly, Hello Sunshine participates in popular feminism's logic of the economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 10) through its aim to 'shine a light' on women's work. On their website, Hello Sunshine claims: 'We bring original, distinctive, entertaining and important women-centred stories into the light'.² This is coupled with the name, Hello Sunshine, with its yellow branding in its logo, web design, and social media pages, which suggests the illuminating work being done by the company. Popular feminism's central logic is that feminist work is done by making visible some aspects of gendered issues, while obscuring others. Rather than a *politics* of visibility, where making visible marginalised and disenfranchised groups is 'crucial to an understanding and an expansion of rights for those communities', this is an *economy* of visibility where 'visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end' (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 22–23 emphasis in original). Like the T-shirt which reads 'This Is What a Feminist Looks Like', the politics of Hello Sunshine 'are contained within the visibility' (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 23); the political work of feminism has been completed because feminism, as an idea, has been made visible. Moreover, this has been completed through affective feelings of happiness and uplift. Unlike Sara Ahmed's figure of the 'feminist killjoy', who is attributed as the origin of bad feeling by being angry and humourless (Ahmed 2010), popular feminism's expressions are coded as friendly and safe, ensuring they remain accommodating and corporate friendly (Banet-Weiser 2018a, 15; Gill 2016, 618).

Hello Sunshine's investment in the economies of visibility is apparent in its branding and mission statement, as well as its upbeat tone across its website and social media accounts. This is compounded by Witherspoon's

star image as a perky, all-American girl, epitomised by one of her most famous roles as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001). Bringing this back specifically to this article's concern with women's authorship, what is significant about Hello Sunshine's use of visibility as a metaphor is that it suggests female authorship and agency and women's complex narratives exist a priori; they have always been 'out there', and only need to be uncovered and illuminated. This contradicts feminist film and media theory's claim that women's authorship has been actively obscured, curtailed, dismissed, or forgotten due to the patriarchal structures of media industries (Gaines 2016; Stamp 2015; Mayne 1990). Moreover, it is inattentive to the politics embedded in this curatorial effort: who makes the decision about which women are spotlighted and for whom do they do this? Despite Witherspoon's claim that her media company is 'disruptive' of traditional male-dominated media industries, Hello Sunshine articulates a logic of popular feminism that obscures a critique of the systemic sexism of the film and television industries.

Sisterhood and authorship: Andrea Arnold

I now turn to *BLL* and the alleged treatment of second season director Andrea Arnold as evidence of the consequences of obscuring critiques of the media industry's systemic sexism. On 12 July 2019, midway through the run of *BLL*'s second season, *IndieWire* released a story about Arnold's alleged loss of creative control at the hands of HBO and the show's writer, Kelley. With season one director Vallée unable to direct season two of *BLL* due to commitments to another HBO show, *Sharp Objects*, Arnold was hired to direct it instead, with 'free rein' to present her version of the show '[f]rom prep, through production, and into post-production' (O'Falt 2019). However, during post-production, HBO and Kelley allegedly called in Vallée to take over editing with his team in Montreal and 'unify the visual style of season 1 and 2' (O'Falt 2019). Moreover, when additional photography started a few months later, Vallée became 'an extremely hands-on EP dictating not only what would be shot, but how it would be shot, oversight that Arnold never had during the initial shoot' (O'Falt 2019). Arnold was apparently never told that her footage would be later shaped by Vallée into the show's distinctive style; there was no style bible and no clear showrunner nor creative producer to shape the season. The gender optics of this story are clear. As the *Indiewire* report sums up: 'A show dominated by some of the most powerful actresses in Hollywood hired a fiercely independent woman director – who was now being forced to watch from the director's chair as scenes were shot in the style of her male predecessor' (O'Falt 2019).

Although *IndieWire* cites several anonymous sources, the story is essentially speculation as none of the show's high-profile creative personnel have

confirmed that it is true; in fact, Witherspoon, Kidman, and then-head of programming at HBO, Casey Bloys, all deny the story (Rice 2019). Arnold has not spoken publicly about the incident. The nature of (gendered) power structures in the film and television industries mean Arnold's perspective may never be revealed – a further barrier to uncovering the material conditions in which women work. Responses to this incident suggest it exposes the difficulties of film auteurs working in television (Leigh 2019) – an intensely collaborative medium which privileges writers and producers over directors, often in the form of the showrunner in quality television (Mittell 2015; Perren and Schatz 2015; Newman and Levine 2012). This relationship is made even more difficult if the film director is a woman, particularly as reports suggest Kelley and Vallée had an unusually close working relationship (Blake 2019; Roberts 2019). For this article, however, the significance of the incident is in relation to Witherspoon's popular feminism and, as I will now detail, its uneasiness in relation to the show's discursive construction of feminist collaboration and co-authorship via a performance of sisterhood.

In both its narrative and surrounding discourse, *BLL* makes explicit appeals to sisterhood. This is especially evident in *BLL*'s final scene of season one. Throughout the season, we follow a group of women, Madeline (Reese Witherspoon), Celeste (Nicole Kidman), Jane (Shailene Woodley), Renata (Laura Dern), and Bonnie (Zoë Kravitz), who are connected by virtue of their children attending the same school. The first season slowly reveals that Celeste's husband, Perry (Alexander Skarsgård), is abusing his wife and that he raped Jane and is father to her child. When this becomes known to the women during a school event, Bonnie, in anger, pushes Perry down a flight of stairs, causing his death. The women, witnessing this event, report Perry's death as a self-inflicted accident and keep Bonnie's involvement secret. In the final scene of season one, the women stand together on the beach, watching their children play. They look meaningfully at each other as if reflecting on the fateful night that joined them together. The ending is dreamlike, with a handheld camera, slow motion, and emotive classical music; it appears to be a female utopia without domestic abuse, rape or men, although I will complicate this reading later in the article by considering the racial politics of this scene. The adaptation consolidates the show's themes of sisterly solidarity, as Moriarty's novel includes the men in the secret surrounding Perry's death (Moriarty 2015, 447), whereas the show only involves the women. Drawing on Elana Levine's idea of a 'feminist fantasy space' (Levine 2013, 143), Alsop argues *BLL*'s beach scene offers the women 'solace and self-protection' by envisioning 'a post-post-feminist world, in which gender-based solidarity is presented as both an essential strategy and an effective one' (Alsop 2019, 1029). *BLL*'s rhetoric of sisterhood is also compounded in the show's promotional material. Witherspoon posted numerous photos on Instagram of her castmates, whom she called

her 'sisters', to extol the power of female friendship. In interviews, Witherspoon and Kidman talk about their experience filming *BLL* as a 'girls club' (Singh 2017) where they worked closely with each other and other women to 'nurture each other's performance' and create 'the greatest ensemble experience' they have ever had (Hughes 2017).

This appeal to sisterhood is not unique to *BLL*. Within the recent rise of women-centric television, a rhetoric of sisterhood has emerged. While sisterhood has long been important to feminism, especially second-wave feminism (Morgan 1973), an image of sisterhood appears within a specific political context of post-postfeminism. Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey identify this as the rise of the 'girl squad' – a symbol of an emergent feminism that emphasises 'collective solidarity' over 'the individualised, competitive, feminine consumer of the postfeminist era' (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2020, 128). In celebrity culture, the image of the girl squad, exemplified by celebrities such as Taylor Swift, circulates as a product of commercialized friendship (Garber 2015). However, female collectivity can take on other meanings. Alsop (2019) argues that rhetorics of sisterhood, including *BLL*, indicate a shift from postfeminist girlfriend culture, where shows like *Sex and the City* previously positioned female friendships as the most important relationship in a woman's life (Winch 2013), to a display of sisterhood where women are bonded by political affinity and female solidarity. By underscoring political over sentimental alliances between women, Alsop argues the rhetoric of sisterhood recalls and updates second-wave feminism's emphasis of female collectivity and foregrounds an explicitly feminist and anti-patriarchal ethos (Alsop 2019, 1026). Shelley Cobb expands this for her article in this issue, arguing that the visibility of female showrunners/producers, female-centred stories, and female stars in peak television create 'an intimate public of "feminist-femininity" that manifests as images of sisterhood (both on and off screen)'.

During the production of *BLL*'s second season, the show's rhetoric of sisterhood was also initially extended to Arnold. After wrapping filming, Witherspoon, Dern, and Kidman all posted photos on their Instagram accounts, praising their 'sisters', including Arnold. Dern captioned her post: 'Andrea Arnold. Wrapping our Big Little Lies journey today. Loving you and my tribe of sisters @nicolekidman @reesewitherspoon @zoeisabel-lakravitz @shailenewoodley #merylstreep #BLL' (lauradern 2018). In the image, Dern wears a Girls on Top t-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Andrea Arnold' – a brand highlighting individual female directors and thus displaying popular feminist ideas of women's progress in media production being marked by canonising individual filmmakers (Perkins and Schreiber 2019, 920; Warner 2023, 6). In her post, Kidman praised her 'Monterey 5 sisters' and their 'fearless leader' Arnold (nicolekidman 2018). Finally, Witherspoon posted a now deleted photo of various castmates and

captioned it by sending ‘big love to my sisters’ and thanking their director, Arnold (Fowler 2018). Arnold is recuperated into this sisterhood via spectacular, performative, and media-friendly modes of popular feminism. Moreover, hiring Arnold – a woman filmmaker with a strong track record of making films with a feminist ethos (Ince 2017; Hockenhuil 2017) – aids *BLL*’s claims to feminist authorship. While not dismissing the positive experience the cast may have had while working with Arnold, these social media posts also work to take advantage of Arnold’s feminist credentials as part of this discursive performance of sisterhood.

Once the *IndieWire* story broke, however, the cast were largely silent, despite the story gaining traction. After the story was published, the hashtag #ReleaseTheArnoldCut trended on Twitter (Jamieson 2019). In reply to one of Witherspoon’s tweets, which was promoting that week’s *BLL* episode through a call to (assumed) female collectivity – ‘Who’s getting together for #BigLittleLies this weekend?’ – numerous social media users commented asking for a response to the Arnold story. High-profile women, including Ava DuVernay, defended Arnold on Twitter. However, *BLL*’s main cast did not materialise any support for Arnold, despite their praise for her in previous social media posts. Moreover, they did not remark on the gender optics of the story. In one of the only comments on the incident, which occurred months after the story broke, Witherspoon re-iterated that the second season’s production was a collaborative process:

In our minds, there is no controversy . . . This was an incredibly collaborative process for all of us and the idea that anyone was mistreated and not communicated with is completely not true . . . [W]e are thrilled with the collaboration that yielded this season. It could have never been this show had it not been with these particular artists collaborating on this particular material. (Rice 2019)

Whether or not Arnold’s mistreatment at the hands of Kelley, Vallée, and HBO is true, the story precipitates extremely poor gender politics and reflects larger problems women face in the film and television industries: a lack of trust and communication from male colleagues; a dismissal of authority and leadership; and an undermining of creative vision. Witherspoon’s lack of reckoning with the gendered optics could be an oversight on her part, or an indication of how deeply embedded the gendered structures of power are in television. Despite being a Hollywood A-Lister, she is still working with powerful men with significant positions of authority: Kelley, as writer, Vallée (who died in 2021) as director, and Bloys as head of programming at HBO – the latter of whom insists that the *IndieWire* story is untrue (Bucksbaum 2019). The story, after all, suggests that it was Kelley and HBO undermining Arnold’s creative control; it does not indicate whether Witherspoon and Kidman, as executive producers, knew what was going on

or attempted to intervene in some way, only that they ‘loved working with Arnold and trusted her intrinsically’ (O’Falt 2019). It mirrors a similar incident, described by Jacqueline Johnson in the roundtable as part of this issue, where male executives at HBO gave Vallée disproportionate credit for authoring *Sharp Objects* and ignored Amy Adams’ attempts to acknowledge the creative efforts of Marti Noxon. Kelley/HBO’s control, at the apparent expense of Witherspoon, Kidman, and Arnold, suggests how deeply entrenched sexism is in the media industries. This sits uneasily and complexly next to Hello Sunshine/Witherspoon’s larger efforts to foreground women’s voices, shine a light on women’s authorship and agency, and work collaboratively as part of a sisterhood to tell women’s stories on screen. What is significant here is that, when this incident is framed discursively through popular feminism, *BLL*’s alleged exclusion of Arnold or at least the failure to consider the gendered dynamics of this reported exclusion, suggests the selective nature with which popular feminism promotes and makes visible women’s work. Popular feminism disciplines the kinds of feminist statements that can be made, limiting even powerful women like Witherspoon within its logics.

Sisterhood and adaptation: race

I turn now to another instance of exclusion, this time examining the narrative treatment of Black women in *BLL*, to demonstrate further how popular feminism disregards those who trouble its logics. As I will now argue, *BLL*’s constructs an image of white sisterhood, which excludes women of colour, through the process of adaptation – specifically through the colourblind casting of Kravitz and narrative changes made by Kelley. In Moriarty’s novel, Bonnie’s race is not explicitly mentioned, but she is described as having a ‘long, blonde plait’ (Moriarty 2015, 445), suggesting that she is white. The adaptation casts Bonnie as Black, diversifying this white world. However, the show does not critically engage with or even acknowledge Bonnie’s race. Kravitz has been vocal about this in interviews, saying ‘I tried to get a little more of [race] put into *Big Little Lies*’ (Eells 2018), but the show failed to do so, again revealing the gender and race power dynamics at play in *BLL*’s production. Throughout the second season, the women agonise over whether to tell the police the truth of Perry’s death. Eventually they decide to confess, and the final scene sees the women, including Bonnie, walk into the police station. The punishment they get is unclear. In the context of institutionalised racism and systemic police brutality towards people of colour, the dynamics of race embedded in this moment are pertinent yet unacknowledged by the show. Moreover, season two develops Bonnie’s backstory of abuse, but changes the source of the abuse from Bonnie’s white father (as it is in the novel) to her Black mother, capitulating to racist stereotypes of violent

Black mothers (Hebbar 2019). Roberta Garrett argues that this severs the link between patriarchy and abuse and problematically privileges themes of maternal abuse and intergenerational female conflict (Garrett 2023). That *BLL* creates an uncritical colourblind world is especially revealed by the actor who plays Bonnie's mother, Crystal Fox, who disclosed that the only provocative line about race in the two seasons – 'I haven't seen one other Black person since I've been out here' – was a result of her ad-libbing (Desta 2019).

Black women are also narratively excluded from *BLL*'s construction of sisterhood. Sisterhood has long been considered a form of female solidarity only extended to white women (hooks 1984). Ju Oak Kim argues that the inclusion of minority women in quality feminist television, including *BLL*, paradoxically works to recentralise white female protagonists in gendered solidarity (Kim 2022). Similarly, Nygaard and Lagerwey argue that the inclusion of characters of colour in predominantly white programmes shores up television's centralisation of whiteness (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2020, 14). *BLL* excludes Black women in its sisterhood through the process of adaptation. While Moriarty's novel resolves the plot neatly – Bonnie confesses to pushing Perry to his death and is convicted of involuntary manslaughter by an unlawful and dangerous act – the adaptation leaves season one's ending ambiguous through the antagonising figure of Detective Adrienne Quinlan (Merrin Dungey). In season one's final image, Detective Quinlan watches the women on the beach. A POV shot through her binoculars unsettles the idea that the women got away with being implicated in Perry's death; they are still under surveillance and their fate is uncertain. This is not, then, a feminist fantasy space of gender-based solidarity, as Alsop argued earlier, but one extended primarily to white women and threatened to be destroyed by a Black woman.

Significantly, this cliffhanger ending burdens Detective Quinlan's character with the masculine-coded values of ambiguous storytelling. Kelley deliberately changed the ending of the novel to offer a more 'realistic' ending, arguing 'life doesn't serve up closure very often' (Kelley 2017). While Moriarty's resolved ending aligns the novel closely with the disparaged feminine genre of romance with its neat happy endings, Kelley's more ambiguous, 'realistic' ending suggests the more serious masculine genre of the quality serial drama. This is a gendered struggle of adaptation, where masculine and feminist discourses of taste compete (Cobb 2011) – and where masculine discourses, in this case, win out. By means of the show displacing these masculine values of ambiguity, realism, and threat onto the Black woman, Detective Quinlan is excluded from the construction of white sisterhood. She is positioned as 'spoiling' the (predominantly) white women's sisterhood (Ahmed 2010, 67), which shores up the whiteness of this gendered solidarity. Similarly, Bonnie is also burdened with carrying the effects of male decisions about 'ambiguous' storytelling. The novel explains

that Bonnie's spontaneous killing of Perry is motivated by her father abusing her as a child. Vallée reveals that Bonnie's backstory was downplayed in the show's first season because he did not want to give a reason for or justify the killing (Ibrahim 2019). Once again, the Black woman is burdened with carrying the repercussions of ambiguity – narratively, thematically, and politically. As Shamira Ibrahim argues, failing to understand Bonnie's motivation for killing Perry means the show does not 'lend itself to the novel's intended effect of showing the sisterhood that forms in the midst of trauma' (Ibrahim 2019). Bonnie's exclusion from this sisterhood continues into the second season. Although Bonnie removed the abusive husband from Celeste's family in the first season, making way for the moment of white sisterhood on the beach, in the second season Bonnie becomes withdrawn, hostile, and erratic under the strain of the women's secret and threatens to destroy their sisterly pact. This frustrates the other women, who complain that she is putting them all at risk. Bonnie's position in this sisterhood, it is suggested, is always tentative.

I want to bring this narrative exclusion together with this article's concerns with authorship and adaptation. As I argued, Arnold and the show's Black female characters, Bonnie and Detective Quinlan, are excluded from *BLL*'s construction of sisterhood. Cobb argues that sisterhood is a key tool within the feminist politics of adaptation; it is not only 'a metaphor for both female solidarity and intimacy that evokes both feminist politics and the affective work of women's intimate public', but one that 'mak[es] room for female authorship' (Cobb 2015, 122). Although, as we have seen, the political potential of this sisterhood is often limited as it neglects racial and sexual differences between women, adaptation-as-sisterhood evokes 'the potentially progressive idea of collaborative authorship amongst women in a masculinized context' (Cobb 2015, 81). Theorising women's adaptation as a conversation, Cobb argues that we can consider women's multiple modes of authorship through collaboration and co-authorship, allowing us to sidestep power struggles related to adaptation (such as fidelity discourses) in favour of an emphasis on the complexities of the conversation between and amongst all the participants (Cobb 2015, 14).

Cobb explicitly theorises this in a postfeminist context, where women's adaptation-as-conversation can enable moments of female solidarity when women's representation shifts ambivalently between progressive and conservative images. How do the feminist politics of *BLL*'s sisterhood shift, then, when the popular feminist intentions of adaptation and collaborative authorship are expressly vocalised? Witherspoon explicitly states this intention, saying that female collectivity inspired her to option Moriarty's novel as the material offered 'multiple voices for women' (Goldberg 2017) through the large female cast and the numerous female authors it involved. Yet, by examining

the narrative position of Black women, we can see the limitation to this popular feminist approach of adaptation-as-sisterhood. For one, it is apparent that men still retain powerful positions of authority – Kelley as writer, Vallée as director – and implement enormous creative control, often at the expense of women. While discursively this is a show about women’s art that brings together many women in collaboration and conversation, in practice, men still dominate prestige television. Furthermore, masculine notions of taste still prevail, even if it works against the feminist intentions of the show. Finally, popular feminism, despite or perhaps because of its attempts to counter or work against the sexism of the media industries, is uncritical in its whiteness, excluding women of colour from its sisterhood and shoring up its white feminism.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted the various barriers and limitations still at work for women in television. Firstly, Kelley and Vallée’s creative control, which both allegedly undermined Arnold’s agency and excludes Black women from the narrative construction of sisterhood, reveals the entrenched sexism of the media industries, even in a major women-driven show such as *BLL*. Secondly, this article reveals the limits of popular feminism. Despite *BLL*’s attempts to make explicit the themes of sisterhood, collectivity, and collaboration through the processes of women’s authorship and adaptation, this excludes women who cannot be contained within popular feminism’s logics: Andrea Arnold, whose alleged treatment complicates the selective nature through which women’s authorship and agency are illuminated; and Black women, whose representation functions to shore up white women’s sisterhood and to take on the burdens of masculine notions of complex storytelling. *BLL* works hard to display images of sisterhood through its narrative and promotional material. Yet, it does not stand in solidarity with those who ‘trouble’ it. Although popular feminism makes selective aspects of feminism highly visible across the media landscape, it is also limited in its scope by restricting a critique of more deep-rooted structural forms of sexism and racism in the media industries. Drawing on popular feminism, Witherspoon’s feminist efforts obscure the material conditions of women working in television production roles and the structures of sexism and racism governing women’s representations. As feminist academics, we must remain attentive to the ways discursive forms of authorship are embedded within structures of power and how these inform the feminist politics of television’s images.

Notes

1. Witherspoon originally produced films and television programmes, including *Big Little Lies*, under her production company, Pacific Standard, which she co-founded with Bruna Papandrea in 2012. In 2016, Pacific Standard became a subsidiary of Witherspoon's larger media company Hello Sunshine. In 2021, Hello Sunshine was sold to content company Candle Media. Witherspoon and Hello Sunshine's CEO, Sarah Harden, sit on the board of Candle Media, continue to oversee day-to-day operations, and remain significant equity holders.
2. Previous versions of Hello Sunshine's website made the 'shine the light' metaphor more explicit, claiming: 'We tell stories we love – from big to small, funny to complex – all shining a light on where women are now and helping them chart a new path forward . . . We are about shining a light on female authorship and agency'. Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210129074100/https://hello-sunshine.com/our-story> [accessed 29 August 2023].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Sarah Louise Smyth is a Lecturer in Film at the University of Essex, UK. Her work focuses on women's authorship and the screen industries, and she has published essays on British women filmmakers. She is currently beginning a new project on Nora Ephron and has recently published the chapter "Nora, Julie, Julia: Legacies of Older Women in Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia* (2009)" in *Women, Ageing and the Screen Industries* (2023).

ORCID

Sarah Louise Smyth  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2979-5030>

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alsop, Elizabeth. 2019. "Sorority Flow: The Rhetoric of Sisterhood in Post-Network Television." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 1026–1042. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1667066.
- Andrews, Hannah, and Sarah Arnold. 2022. "Editorial." *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 17 (3): 233–239. doi:10.1177/17496020221104961.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018a. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018b. "Postfeminism and Popular Feminism." *Feminist Media Histories* 4 (2): 152–156. doi:10.1525/fmh.2018.4.2.152.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, and Kathryn Claire Higgins. 2022. "Television and the 'Honest' Woman: Mediating the Labor of Believability." *Television and New Media* 23 (2): 127–147. doi:10.1177/15274764211045742.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg. 2020. "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation." *Feminist Theory* 21 (1): 3–24. doi:10.1177/1464700119842555.
- Barron, Brittany J. 2021. "Women's Lived Experience and the Male Gaze in Big Little Lies." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 54 (5): 1073–1094. doi:10.1111/jpcu.13069.
- Bautista, Anna Marie. 2021. "Exposing the 'Lie': Uncovering Abuse and Misogyny in *Big Little Lies*." *Feminist Media Studies* 23 (4): 1721–1736. doi:10.1080/14680777.2021.1996417.
- Blake, Meredith. 2019. "Andrea Arnold Reportedly Losing Control Over 'Big Little Lies' Isn't Just About Gender." *Los Angeles Times*, July 15. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-andrea-arnold-big-little-lies-analysis-20190715-story.html>
- Boorstin, Julia. 2018. "At Reese Witherspoon's Hello Sunshine, Women Play the Leads—Onscreen and off." CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/29/reese-witherspoons-hello-sunshine-creates-content-for-and-by-women.html>
- Brunson, Charlotte. 1990. "Problems with Quality." *Screen* 31 (1): 67–90. doi:10.1093/screen/31.1.67.
- Bucksbaum, Sydney. 2019. "HBO Boss Addresses Potential Big Little Lies Season 3, Behind-The-Scenes Controversy." *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/tv/2019/07/24/big-little-lies-season-3-casey-bloys-tca-2019/>
- Chernikoff, Leah. 2023. "Reese Witherspoon is Starting a New Chapter." *Harper's Bazaar*, July. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a44450841/reese-witherspoon-interview-2023/>
- Cobb, Shelley. 2011. "Adaptation, Fidelity, and Gendered Discourses." *Adaptation* 4 (1): 28–37. doi:10.1093/adaptation/apq011.
- Cobb, Shelley. 2015. *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi:10.1057/9781137315878.
- Collins, Jim. 2010. *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Destia, Yohana. 2019. "Big Little Lies: Crystal Fox, AKA Bonnie's Mom, is Even Cooler Than You Think." *Vanity Fair*, June. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/06/big-little-lies-crystal-fox-elizabeth-bonnie-interview>
- Eells, Josh. 2018. "Zoe Kravitz: American Woman." *Rolling Stone*, October. <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/zoe-kravitz-naked-cover-story-746684/>
- Ford, Jessica. 2019. "Women's Indie Television: The Intimate Feminism of Women-Centric Dramedies." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 928–943. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1667060.
- Fowler, Danielle. 2018. "The Big Little Lies Cast Celebrate Wrapping Filming for Season Two." *Harper's Bazaar*. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/celebrities/news/a22766974/big-little-lies-cast-celebrate-season-two-finale-social-media/>
- Gaines, Jane M. 2016. "On Not Narrating the History of Feminism and Film." *Feminist Media Histories* 2 (2): 6–31. doi:10.1525/fmh.2016.2.2.6.

- Galt, Frances. 2020. *Women's Activism Behind the Screens: Trade Unions and Gender Inequality in the British Film and Television Industries*. Bristol: Bristol University Press. doi:10.1332/policypress/9781529206296.001.0001.
- Garber, Megan. 2015. "The Summer of the #squad." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/07/the-summer-of-the-squad/399308/>
- Garrett, Roberta. 2023. "Home is Where the Hate Is: Gender, Race, Class and the Domestic Abuse Plotline in Fiction and on Screen." *Feminist Media Studies* 1–17. doi:10.1080/14680777.2022.2155861.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2016. "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 610–630. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293.
- Goldberg, Lesley. 2017. "'Big Little Lies' an Important Step for Women, Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman Say." *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/big-little-lies-an-important-step-women-reese-witherspoon-nicole-kidman-say-964393/>
- Gray, Emma. 2017. "The Stunning Finale of 'Big Little Lies' is What Happens When Women Drive ArtNo Title." *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/big-little-lies-finale-is-what-happens-when-women-drive-art_n_58e1cd05e4b0c777f7886553
- Haastrup, Helle Kannik. 2018. "Hermione's Feminist Book Club: Celebrity Activism and Cultural Critique." *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 34 (65): 98–116. doi:10.7146/mediekultur.v34i65.104842.
- Hale, Mike. 2017. "In Big Little Lies, Monterey Moms and Their Clichés." *The New York Times*, February 16. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/arts/television/big-little-lies-nicole-kidman-reese-witherspoon.html>
- Havas, Julia. 2022. *Woman Up: Invoking Feminism in Quality Television*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Hebbar, Reshmi. 2019. "Big Little Lies is Drowning in Its Own Good Intentions About Race." *Slate*. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/07/big-little-lies-hbo-race-drowning.html>
- Hockenhull, Stella. 2017. *British Directors of the New Millennium*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-48992-0.
- hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hughes, Sarah. 2017. "Reese Witherspoon: How She Became Hollywood's Most Powerful Woman." *The Guardian*, March 12. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/12/reese-witherspoon-hollywood-powerful-female-star-big-little-lies-sky-atlantic>
- Ibrahim, Shamira. 2019. "What *Big Little Lies* Doesn't Get About Bonnie." *The Atlantic*, July. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/07/big-little-lies-season-2-question-of-bonnie/594457/>
- Ince, Kate. 2017. *The Body and the Screen Female Subjectivities in Contemporary Women's Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury. doi:10.5040/9781501396519.
- Jamieson, Amber. 2019. "Fans are Calling on HBO to #releasethearnoldcut of 'Big Little Lies' After the Director Was Reportedly Sidelined." *Buzzfeed*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/amberjamieson/big-little-lies-andrea-arnold-cut>
- Jermyn, Deborah. 2012. "'Get a Life, Ladies. Your Old One is Not Coming Back': Ageing, Ageism and the Lifespan of Female Celebrity." *Celebrity Studies* 3 (1): 1–12. doi:10.1080/19392397.2012.644708.
- Kelley, David E. 2017. *Inside the Episodes: Featurette*. USA: HBO.

- Kim, Ju Oak. 2022. "Intersectionality in Quality Feminist Television: Rethinking Women's Solidarity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Big Little Lies*." *Feminist Media Studies* 22 (6): 1463–1477. doi:10.1080/14680777.2021.1891447.
- Lagerwey, Jorie, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra. 2016. "Female-Centered TV in an Age of Precarity." *Genders* 1 (1). <https://www.colorado.edu/genders/issue-11-spring-2016>
- Lang, Brent, and Rebecca Rubin. 2021. "Reese Witherspoon's Hello Sunshine Sold for \$900 Million to Media Company Backed by Blackstone." *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/reese-witherspoon-hello-sunshine-sold-1235032618/>
- Lauzen, Martha M. 2021. "Boxed In: Women on Screen and Behind the Scenes in 2020–2021." *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film*.
- Lavigne, Carlen, ed. 2014. *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-Use, Recycle*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Leigh, Danny. 2019. "Does Andrea Arnold's Experience on *Big Little Lies* Suggest That Auteurs are Doomed?" *The Guardian*, July 18. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/18/does-andrea-arnolds-experience-on-big-little-lies-suggest-that-auteurs-are-doomed>
- Levine, Elana. 2013. "Grey's Anatomy: Feminism." In *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, 139–147. New York: New York University Press. doi:10.18574/nyu/9780814729465.003.0019.
- Levy, Yael. 2022. *Chick TV: Antiheroines and Time Unbound*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Mangan, Lucy. 2017. "Big Little Lies: Kidman and Witherspoon Shine in Masterly Twist on Desperate Housewives." *The Guardian*, February 17. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/feb/17/big-little-lies-nicole-kidman-and-reese-witherspoon-shine-in-masterful-twist-on-desperate-housewives>
- Mayne, Judith. 1990. *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- McNally, Karen, ed. 2022. *American Television During a Television Presidency*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2004. "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (3): 255–264. doi:10.1080/1468077042000309937.
- Mittell, Jason. 2015. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Morgan, Robin. 1973. *Sisterhood Is Powerful*. New York: Vintage.
- Moriarty, Liane. 2015. *Big Little Lies*. London: Penguin.
- Nash, Meredith, and Imelda Whelehan, eds. 2017. *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-52971-4.
- Negra, Diane, and Yvonne Tasker, eds. 2014. *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Newman, Michael Z., and Elana Levine. 2012. *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*. New York: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, Emily. 2017. "The Surprising Generosity of *Big Little Lies*." *The New Yorker*, February 26.
- Nygaard, Taylor, and Jorie Lagerwey. 2017. "Broadcasting Quality: Re-Centering Feminist Discourse with *The Good Wife*." *Television and New Media* 18 (2): 105–113. doi:10.1177/1527476416652485.
- Nygaard, Taylor, and Jorie Lagerwey. 2020. *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness*. New York: New York University Press.

- O'Falt, Chris. 2019. "Big Little Lies' Season 2 Turmoil: Inside Andrea Arnold's Loss of Creative Control." *IndieWire*. <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/07/big-little-lies-season-2-andrea-arnold-lost-creative-control-jean-marc-vallee-1202156884/>
- Perkins, Claire, and Michele Schreiber. 2019. "Independent Women: From Film to Television." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 919–927. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1667059.
- Perren, Alisa, and Thomas Schatz. 2015. "Theorizing Television's Writer-Producer: Re-Viewing the Producer's Medium." *Television and New Media* 16 (1): 86–93. doi:10.1177/1527476414552907.
- Pinedo, Isabel C. 2021. *Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics of Complex Women in Serial Narratives*. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003031598.
- Radway, Janice. 1997. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-Of-The-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Reinhard, Michael. 2019. "Recycling Melodrama: HBO's 'Quality Television' Discourse and the Place of Women's Testimony." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 1046–1049. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1667074.
- Rice, Lynette. 2019. "Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon on All Things Big Little Lies Season 2, Possible Season 3." *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/tv/2019/07/28/big-little-lies-nicole-kidman-reese-witherspoon-season-2-possible-3/>
- Roberts, Soraya. 2019. "This (Wo)man's Work." *Longreads*. <https://longreads.com/2019/07/19/this-womans-work/>
- Rorke, Robert. 2017. "Big Little Lies is a Terrible Whodunnit." *The New York Post*, March 20. <https://nypost.com/2017/03/20/big-little-lies-is-a-terrible-whodunnit/>
- Rottenberg, Catherine. 2018. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Natasha. 2017. "Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman Interview Each Other." *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/big-lies-stars-nicole-kidman-reese-witherspoon-interview/story?id=45446989>
- Stamp, Shelley. 2015. "Feminist Media Historiography and the Work Ahead." *Screening the Past* 40. <http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-40-first-release/feminist-media-historiography-and-the-work-ahead/>
- Tolentino, Jia. 2017. "The Cathartic Finale of Big Little Lies." *The New Yorker*.
- Tribbitt, Maya. 2019. "Reese Witherspoon on Why She Self-Funded Her Production Company for 5 Years." *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/reese-witherspoon-funding-hello-sunshine-1197920/>
- Villarreal, Yvonne. 2019. "Big Little Lies Cast Wants Season 2 to Encourage Women to Unite and 'Make Mistakes Together'." *Los Angeles Times*, July 7. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-big-little-lies-season-2-20190607-story.html>
- Warner, Helen. 2023. "An indie voice for a generation of women?: Greta Gerwig, and female authorship post #Metoo." *Feminist Media Studies*. doi:10.1080/14680777.2023.2196605.
- Winch, Alison. 2013. *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781137312747.