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To cite this article: Stefania Marghita & Sarah Louise Smyth (2024) Roundtable on women's authorship and adaptation in contemporary television, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 22:1, 416-433, DOI: [10.1080/17400309.2023.2263691](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2263691)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2263691>



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Published online: 28 Feb 2024.



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Roundtable on women’s authorship and adaptation in contemporary television

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ABSTRACT

This roundtable took place in summer 2023 and sought to capture current thinking on women’s authorship and adaptation in contemporary television. The roundtable brought together emerging and more established scholars from the US and the UK, including Elizabeth Alsop, Jacqueline Johnson, Stefania Marghitu, Isabel C. Pinedo, and Theresa Trimmel, and was moderated by Sarah Louise Smyth. While all scholars note a significant “surge” in women’s television authorship, as many women showrunners, writers, producers, and directors are becoming highly visible in the streaming era, there are still a number of barriers at work: whiteness continues to be extremely pervasive; notions of taste and quality continue to undervalue women’s work; and the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes (ongoing during this roundtable’s discussion) disproportionately impact cisgender women and BIPOC, trans and non-binary people. This roundtable hopes to generate more discussions in these areas and open up further avenues for research.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 4 September 2023; Accepted 19 September 2023

KEYWORDS Women’s authorship; television; adaptation; feminism; streaming era

Sarah Louise Smyth (moderator): What do you make of the current state of women’s television authorship? Have there been any significant or interesting developments recently?

Elizabeth Alsop: It feels to me as though we’re witnessing something – I won’t call it a resurgence – but maybe a *surge* of interest in women’s authorship in television, both among scholars and to a degree among viewers as well. On the scholarly side, I’m thinking of recent academic studies like Isabel’s book, *Difficult Women on Television Drama*, which takes on the topic of authorship in depth and offers some really exciting theoretical formulations; for instance, the concept of ‘indirect authorship’, which designates the

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matrix of external forces that shape TV production and reception. Similarly, I just read Maria Pramaggiore's chapter in *Women and New Hollywood*, 'Feminism, Auteurism, and the 1970s, in Theory', which offers generative ways of rethinking authorship – of both film and film theory – as a more collaborative and capacious enterprise, less indebted to 'single-author' paradigms that have characterized not only auteurism but also the academic star system. Although her focus is obviously on cinema, I think her takeaways could be usefully adapted by TV scholars as well.

At the same time, it seems like there's a greater awareness of women as television authors among the general public. So, you have viewers who are not otherwise particularly interested in television production but who are familiar with Shonda Rhimes, Quinta Brunson, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, and Lena Dunham – and even maybe lesser-known female showrunners, like Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle, Pamela Adlon, Lena Waithe, and Michelle King. In other words, they can identify them as the authors of their respective shows, whether they like what they've authored or not! That does feel like a shift since not so long ago I'd guess that the only female showrunner with that kind of name recognition was Amy Sherman-Palladino. I do think it's interesting – and maybe more than that, telling – that so many of the biggest names I've mentioned are also the stars of the shows they run, suggesting that women must *also* appear as actors – that is, in the more recognizable and potentially palatable role of performers, in order to gain broad acceptance or visibility as an author, too. They must be maximally multi-hyphenate! When we look at some of the most prominent (white) male TV auteurs – David Simon, David Chase, Damon Lindelof, Mike White, Vince Gilligan – we are clearly not seeing this same expectation! (Donald Glover is an exception.)

One very significant development, of course, is the strikes. I wonder if one by-product could be increased literacy among viewers about the labor of television production, the economics of streaming and residuals, etc., and its implications for women and other minoritized workers. Then again, people may be resolutely uninterested in knowing how the TV sausage is made. Who knows!

Stefania Marghitu: Thanks so much for starting us off, Elizabeth! And what a fantastic start it is. Lots of great recent theoretical work with women's film and TV authorship. And I must confess, in addition to co-editing this special dossier, I am also preparing a monograph on women showrunners. I believe these fan interests in women-authored work are cyclical, reflecting the opportunities women are given in the industry. My first case study looks at Gertrude Berg of *The Goldbergs* as a proto-radio and TV showrunner. As Carole Stable chronicles in *The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist*, Berg was grey-listed. A generation of women writer-

producers was shut out from the industry, and we didn't really see women take over these roles again until the late 1970s, until a new sort of surge in the 1980s with Diane English, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, and Susan Harris. And it's also very apt that you mentioned showrunner-stars, which increases awareness along with visibility. I'd say, in addition to those you listed, we can consider post-network women showrunners through Tina Fey, Jenji Kohan, Mara Brock Akil, Mindy Kaling – a lot of showrunner collaborations, such as Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, Issa Rae and Prentice Penny. In the streaming era, and most recently with the strike, we start to see how another generation of writers were shut out and devalued. Cristela Alonzo is only one example of a showrunner who has been open about how quickly a series can be taken away from you.

Jenny Han has been one rare case of a literary author who has become a showrunner with her series *The Summer I Turned Pretty*. This is, of course, after the success of the film adaptations of her previous book series *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. Having such a beloved fanbase, Han has been smart to be so involved to ensure continuity.

Of course, we see whiteness permeating in terms of a vast majority of women given these opportunities. And how Rhimes and the Shondaland brand has complicated issues of inclusion and diversity, as Kristen Warner shows, through color-blind casting. While early streaming touted diversity and inclusion, the reality was far, far from it. Inclusion is the exception, not the rule, as we see with the listed examples and case studies we research and write about.

What interested me and Sarah in connecting authorship and adaptation was how the assumed success relied on built-in fanbases, as with remakes, reboots, and spin-offs. The varying involvement from original creators also showed how layered authorship can look. I've mentioned Jenny Han. Sally Rooney's adaptations are praised because she co-writes televisual episodes. Celeste Ng, by contrast, chose not to be involved in *Little Fires Everywhere*. How does authorial layering and collaboration work? What are other forces that contribute to the final product, as well as other modes of authorship?

Theresa Trimmel: I agree with you both that there has certainly been a shift in the perception of female-centered storytelling in the last decade and a growing interest in women showrunners and their work on US television. I think this 'surge' of high-profile female TV creators, as Elizabeth calls it, started around 2012 with the release of women-run productions such as *Girls*, *Scandal*, and *The Mindy Project* that premiered that same year. These shows initiated a programming cycle that not only saw the intensified visibility of women in front of and behind the camera but also shifted existing discourses about televisual authorship that usually focused on

white male showrunners and writers. However, recent discussions about authorship in television have certainly expanded, as your examples of female showrunners illustrate, and have become more diverse and inclusive with more attention being paid to women, LGBTQ+, and racially diverse showrunners in academic scholarship as well as in mainstream media.

I also think that female-centered productions have not only transformed into ‘Must See TV’ since 2010, but the industry has also undertaken intensified marketing and branding efforts to promote female showrunners-auteurs and women-centered series, consequently changing how female authorship and shows about women are perceived in popular culture. A wide range of female showrunners have become public figures with established author brands and are now recognized for their authorship of and work in US television. I explore this phenomenon in the monograph I am currently working on, which examines female authorship in US television after 2010 and the discursive networks (promotion and reception material) surrounding women showrunners and their series. I also explore how female showrunners, their productions, and paratexts relate to current discussions about gender, race, and LGBTQ+ communities to interrogate how intersections of gender, race, and sexual identity politics operate in relation to women’s authorship.

I think that the surge of female showrunners has, on the one hand, been fostered by the introduction of streaming platforms after 2010 that provided more visibility and creative opportunities for women, particularly behind the camera (e.g. Jenji Kohan and *Orange Is the New Black*, and Joey Soloway and *Transparent*). On the other hand, I also believe that the intensified visibility of women and diversification of authorship discourses (i.e. the inclusion of women, people of color, and from LGBTQ+ communities, as well as intersectional individuals) are also linked to the resurgence of feminism in popular culture, as well as online campaigns such as ‘Black Lives Matter’ from 2013 and the ‘Oscars So White’ controversy in 2015, which have led to important (and more self-conscious) discussions in the creative industries about racial diversity and the inclusion of ethnic minorities (or lack thereof) in Hollywood. As a result, the above-mentioned TV productions, their female showrunners, and their intensified visibility have become part of the current conversations about feminist politics and diversity in popular culture.

These new opportunities for women and the growing interest in female authorship and women showrunners should certainly be celebrated, as they have resulted in a wide range of diverse representations of women on screen. However, as Stefania has rightfully pointed out, certain groups (e.g. women of color, LGBTQ+ communities) are still marginalized and despite the success of showrunners such as Lena Dunham, Tina Fey, Jenji Kohan, Mara Brock Akil, Mindy Kaling, Joey Soloway, Issa Rae, and Shonda Rhimes, hegemonic power relations still prevail in today’s television industries.

Jacqueline Johnson: Excited to add to these fantastic responses! This question takes me back to the Austin Television Festival in 2018, when I watched a struggle over gender and authorship play out at the *Sharp Objects* (HBO) panel. While the male HBO executives wanted to give Jean-Marc Vallée, who directed each episode, a disproportionate amount of credit for how good the show was, Amy Adams continually interjected to highlight the work of showrunner Marti Noxon (whose career could, on its own, anchor a discussion about the changing public and critical perception of women's authorship in television). I do wonder if the panel would have transpired the same way in 2023.

Speaking of a book-to-television adaptation, Stefania I am so happy you brought up Jenny Han! The most interesting development I am seeing right now is that the public understanding of women's authorship is increasingly transmedial. I have been watching *The Summer I Turned Pretty* each week, and I recently finished Jenny Han's other show *XO, Kitty* (a spin-off of the popular *To All the Boys* films). Romance and YA have been two spaces within publishing that have been heavily defined by women's authorship, and I think we will see an increasing number of romance film and television adaptations made for streaming platforms over the next years. Han is an interesting case study for a number of reasons. Picking up on Elizabeth's point about women television authors also being the face of their series, Han doesn't act in any of her adaptations, but she appears in cameos. The cameos work as a reward for the knowledgeable viewer, but they also cement her as the author in our minds. Secondly, Han is very active on social media, and TikTok especially has become a crucial intermediary in the book-to-television adaptation. An increasing number of romance novelists are selling the rights to their books, and with the success of Jenny Han, Casey McQuiston, and the *Bridgerton* adaptation, I expect that number to rise. Finally, Han layers multiple registers of women's authorship into her shows and their paratextual narrative. The sixth episode of *TSITP*'s second season dropped the same night Taylor Swift started her last leg of The Eras Tour in Los Angeles. Taylor Swift is, of course, in the process of re-recording her first six albums so that she can own all of her music. The episode featured a re-recording of the *Reputation* track, 'Delicate', which has yet to be released, and Han posted a video of herself at the tour singing 'Delicate' while Swift performed the same night the episode was released. Han used her status as a noted Swiftie and her social media prowess to tie what is likely the biggest cultural discussion about women's authorship happening currently into the conversation surrounding her show. TikTok blew up over this! All of this, of course, promotes her show when her cast is on strike. I can go on forever about this, but I am looking forward to more scholarship examining how women's authorship moves across mediums and forms!

Isabel C. Pinedo: I agree with Elizabeth about how exciting it is to see so much feminist scholarship about women's television authorship. Lately, I'm excited about women rewriting the true crime narrative. Two examples come to mind: the Amazon docuseries *Ted Bundy: Falling for a Serial Killer*, produced and directed by Trish Wood, and *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, the docuseries produced/directed by Liz Garbus and others, based on the book by Michelle McNamara [moderator's note: Tanya Horeck has written an article on women's authorship and *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* for this issue's special dossier]. Both attempt a feminist reanalysis of well-trodden serial killer tropes and work from a place of empathy for victims and survivors (of the Golden State Killer, in the latter). In the latter, Garbus adapts McNamara's book into the visual vocabulary of documentary television to re-center the serial killer narrative around women and resist fetishizing the crime scene. Anna Froula, Tanya Horeck, Melissa Lenos, and Erin Meyers have been working in this area and have a book anthology in progress with Routledge, tentatively titled *Televising True Crime: The True Crime Genre in the Digital Age*. This is a much-needed televisual and theoretical rewriting of a narrative about gender-based violence.

In this vein of feminist reinterpretation, I look forward to Elizabeth's book re-evaluating Elaine May's work, Stefania's and Theresa's books on showrunners, and Jacqueline's work on Black women's cross-media romance productions. In addition, Jacqueline, your comment brought me back to my Zoom book launch in 2021, when Brandy Monk-Payton suggested, to popular acclaim, that Marti Noxon could serve as a lynchpin to study the place afforded to women by Hollywood by charting and analyzing her work on *Buffy*, *UnREAL*, *Dietland*, and *Sharp Objects*.

What areas of women's television authorship warrant further academic attention?

EA: One area I'd like to see get more academic attention is the intersection between women's authorship across television and film, given how many women have worked in both industries. I'd like to see scholars approach women media-makers' bodies of work more holistically, taking into account (or at least acknowledging) filmmakers' often lengthy resumés directing episodic TV. As I write this, I am envisioning a big beautiful board – definitely not a 'wall of crazy', maybe a wall of visibility? – where feminist scholars could map this all out, revealing, say, that Jamie Babbit, who made *But I'm a Cheerleader* in 1999, would direct Natasha Lyonne again 20 years later in three episodes of *Russian Doll*, created by Lyonne, Leslye Headland, and Amy Poehler. Maybe a better image, however, is the one that Sara Ahmed introduces in *Living a Feminist Life*, where she talks about 'putting

a sponge' to her past as a way of collecting its disparate pieces – a metaphor I find really evocative for thinking about a way to recover all these expressions of women's authorship in one place.

I try to take one step in this direction, methodologically, in a forthcoming essay on Susan Seidelman (for [this volume](#)). In it, I directly relate her work on *Sex and the City* – she directed the pilot and two other episodes during the first season – to her broader filmography, and use it as an opportunity to think more broadly about women's authorship across these two spheres. But I think there's a lot more space to explore here.

SM: Again, Elizabeth, this is all great – holistic approaches and mapping authorship – which also is a nice segue for the next question on Shelley Cobb's work.

TT: I absolutely agree with you, Elizabeth. The intersection between women's authorship across television and film certainly warrants more academic attention. I also think it raises interesting questions about women's television authorship in relation to creative authority and how female directors who have worked in the film industry integrate their artistic vision, especially if they are not the showrunner of a TV program and only hired to direct a few episodes of a series. As Andrea Arnold's participation in *Big Little Lies* demonstrates (as has been reported, Arnold's final cut of the series had been substantially reconfigured in post-production by the executive producers of the show), such collaborations can be quite complicated and challenging if the director's vision and style does not synergize with the ideas and vision of the showrunner, executive producers, and TV network [moderator's note: Sarah Louise Smyth discusses this very issue of Andrea Arnold's authorship in *Big Little Lies* in this issue's special dossier].

I also think it would be crucial to pay more critical attention to female TV showrunners and women's televisual authorship outside the UK and the US. For instance, I have co-written an article about female authorship in contemporary Chinese television in which I examine how female television producers are promoted and what strategies and rhetoric they use to represent themselves, their work, and their authorial agency. Another interesting example is the Spanish series called *Perfect Life* (*Vida Perfecta*, Movistar+, 2019–2021), which focuses on three millennial women. The comedy-drama was created by Leticia Dolera, who has directed and written most of the show's 14 episodes and also stars as the program's protagonist, Maria. Following similar marketing and promotional strategies as HBO with Lena Dunham and *Girls* and Issa Rae and *Insecure*, *Perfect Life* and showrunner

Dolera have been substantially promoted in Spain. Dolera's example attests to Elizabeth's observation that female showrunner-auteurs in contemporary television are expected to be multi-hyphenate in order to gain visibility and acceptance as an author but also to establish their creative authority over their TV show. As Dolera's example further illustrates, there are clearly similarities as to how women's authorship is (discursively) constructed, promoted, and made visible in different television industries. Nevertheless, I think this area still warrants more academic attention to also explore in more depth how TV industries outside the UK and the US have adopted and adapted practices, discourses, and models of women's televisual authorship.

IP: I like what Elizabeth and Stefania refer to as 'a wall of visibility' and 'mapping authorship', respectively. My work on *Camp TV of the 1960s*, in particular, sparked my desire for a social network analysis (in the sociological sense) of behind-the-camera talent, the circulation of producing/writing talent, between different TV programs. In the case of this discussion, it could be extended to include on-screen talent and the movement between on- and off-screen in applicable cases, as well as cross-media circulation. To make this web of connections discernible is to map how women navigate the industry, how mentorship works or is withheld, and the collaborative/competing discourses they create through their productions.

JJ: In addition to echoing Theresa's point about a more global focus in these discussions, I would really love to see more scholarship looking at women's below-the-line labor through the lens of authorship.

SLS: **Feminist academic Shelley Cobb (2015) considers women's adaptation (a women-directed/written film/TV show adapted from a women-authored source) as a conversation between women. This enables us to theorize women's adaptation through collaboration and co-authorship. Do you see this approach as a helpful model for theorizing women's authorship in television, whether the show has been adapted from another source or not? Are there other models of women's authorship we should consider?**

EA: As I mentioned above, I very much embrace a more pluralistic model for thinking and theorizing about women's authorship in both film and television, so I find Shelley Cobb's approach aligned with my own. I have likewise been inspired by other scholars interested in conceptualizing media

authorship as not just a collaborative activity but one that must be understood within its various contexts (I'm thinking of Catherine Grant and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, among others). One idea I've found really helpful is Kyle Stevens's concept of 'mutable signatures', which, to my thinking, allows us to think in more flexible and less totalizing ways about where women's authorship may 'show up', or to discern a signature in a work over which she may have only some or little control. So, it may not be the case that every woman running a show is going to be like Steven Soderbergh on *The Knick* – taking these huge aesthetic swings, going for big, muscular camera movements – but that doesn't mean her authorship is not as significant or as discernible. I mention this in the Seidelman chapter, but I would say our critical apparatus has not been optimized for these less ostentatious authorial displays.

SM: Absolutely. And again, it is about feminist projects of authorship through the lens of collaboration. But also, again, that film and TV are in conversation, and other forms of art and media. I think this unites feminist research and scholarship across disciplines. Shelley's work is an ideal example of this.

SLS: As we write this, SAG-AFTRA members and WGA members are currently on strike. Do you see the reasons these unions are on strike as being especially gendered? Do issues such as the threat of AI and the streaming business model adversely impact cisgender women, trans people, and gender non-binary people?

EA: On this question, I would defer to any roundtable participants who do media industry studies and may have a more in-depth or comprehensive understanding of the strikes. What I would say, however, is that I don't think it's a coincidence that the moment in which Hollywood had become increasingly diversified – writers' rooms included – was also the moment in which it decided to double down on exploitative labor practices and to 'cry poverty', as Fran Drescher memorably put it in the speech she delivered as SAG-AFTRA President on July 14th.

This is not a new story. It's a different sector, of course, but CUNY – the university system for which I teach – was free until the open admissions movement of the 1970s led to the increased enrollment of Black and Latinx students . . . at which point, the city decided it no longer had money to fund the education it had offered white students for decades, and [instituted](#)

tuition. So, to bring it back to the strikes, I would be shocked if there were not a profoundly gendered and racialized dimension to the kinds of extractive policies that have created the conditions for these strikes.

IP: The opportunities afforded by progressive activism and the demand for streaming content have brought more women, BIPOC, trans and non-binary people into the industry, while at the same time, other changes in the business model have had adverse impacts on industry labor. In the excellent *Film Quarterly* webinar, 'Hollywood on Strike!', *Pose* co-creator Steven Canals and others spoke about how writers' rooms, with their mentoring protocols, have shifted into mini rooms, a system in which individual writers contribute a discrete number of scripts to a series for much less money. In effect, this turns a lucrative job into a writing gig without the mentoring process that can lead to producing unless a showrunner initiates it, as Ryan Murphy did with Steven Canals.

TT: As you both say, the strikes are profoundly gendered and racialized but also draw attention to the huge gap between high-profile, above-the-line workers and lower-level and/or emerging writers. As highlighted by several WGA members in *The Hollywood Reporter*, the strike is extremely important for the future of diverse storytelling. Women, people of color and from LGBTQ+ communities are still marginalized and discriminated against in the creative industries and have been affected the most by changes in the television industry since the rise of streaming platforms. For instance, the shift to mini rooms, as Isabel has pointed out, as well as the change to shorter seasons and disagreements over streaming residuals, not only reduce the time writers spend on different projects but also decrease their wages and shorten their employment throughout the year. Within such unstable working conditions and low wages, it is very difficult for lower-level/emerging writers (and in particular for women and BIPOC, trans, and non-binary people in these roles) to make a living from their work, thrive in the industry, and gain access to higher-paying jobs.

JJ: These are all great points from my fellow contributors! As I have been ruminating on the strikes, I continually come back to how streaming platforms have used marginalized groups' desire for greater representation as a way to conceal their active role in making working within the industry more precarious. Recently, *Orange Is the New Black* actress [Kimiko Glenn re-shared a now-viral video](#) on Instagram and TikTok showing just how little she made in residuals from the show in 2020.

OITNB helped launch Netflix and illustrated the vitality of original streaming series (and, of course, was praised for its diversity for years). Meanwhile, most of the actors were given a pittance, and their residual checks are practically the change in the cup holder of your car or the bill you pull out from your pants before a load of laundry. As the daughter of a WGA and SAG-AFTRA member, I know that residuals literally keep the lights on for many people.

And Netflix, of course, isn't alone in this. The Amazon Prime adaptation of *A League of Their Own* was committed to stories about queer women. After fans clamored for more, [the show will end with a second season that is only four episodes](#), to come back to Isabel's point about gig-ification. So yes, I do indeed see this as quite gendered, and I am so glad Stefania and Sarah have asked about this connection.

A couple relevant readings I recommend: [Andrew deWaard on financialization](#) and [Kate Fortmueller's historical perspective on the strikes](#).

SLS: If you're also a teacher, do you find teaching women's television challenging in any way?

EA: I don't currently teach women's television, but I do teach various courses on women's cinema, which I love. I would say that one challenge I've regularly encountered – maybe more of a teachable problem – has to do with taste cultures and the built-in, frequently gendered assumptions students may bring about what is 'worthy' of study. (We spend a lot of time unpacking the concept of a 'guilty pleasure'.) For instance, some students may be less inclined to believe there's artistry present in a mainstream comedy like Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (or, in a different vein, Elaine May's *Ishtar!*). There are also still issues of access. But I recognize that colleagues in television have to contend with that obstacle much more regularly and with the constantly shifting and ephemeral nature of streaming platforms.

SM: I taught an adaptation course, and I began the course with television adaptations such as *Watchmen*, *High Fidelity*, *Normal People*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *Friday Night Lights*. A lot of my interest came from looking at coming-of-age adaptations and youth film and television. We also screened *Clueless*, *Little Women*, and Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. Largely, we did look at pilot episodes and questions of fidelity. I wanted students to question why fidelity was so seemingly important to them in adaptation. Teaching [Alyx Vesey's NRFTS article on High Fidelity](#) was really generative in thinking

about remakes, gender, and race within the world of record stores and music fandom.

I'm still percolating a piece on Sally Rooney and *Normal People* and the rapid adaptations of her first two novels. I am thinking similarly with dossier contributor Jessica Ford's thinking of women-centered texts praised as feminist simply for the visibility of women authors. As *Sharp Objects* and *Big Little Lies* show, women are not granted authorial control in prestige programming on platforms such as HBO. And this is despite high-tier producers at the helm who would try to support women directors taking some control.

I was interested in the series as a coming-of-age adaptation from high school to university. There's a romance between our two protagonists, but the adaptation really builds on the audience falling for Connell via Paul Mescal's breakout role. I became more interested in Connell and Mescal's masculinity, both on-screen and through Mescal's overnight pandemic stardom. The reception of Daisy Edgar Jones' Marianne further complicates the blurry image of this protagonist as precocious and unlikeable. Marianne, as a victim of domestic abuse, is very underdeveloped in both the original source material and the adaptation. The adaptation definitely exacerbates the issues. In contrast, Connell's mental health is a thoughtful and well-paced study. I asked my students about this, as many read Rooney's work. We seemed to come to the conclusion that writing about trauma and depicting it on-screen can still be incredibly difficult. And Marianne's proclivity toward being dominated is grossly under-explored in the series, leading to her low self-worth being associated with BDSM. Discursively, we see the context of Rooney as this praised international millennial literary star, but also as someone working within the confines of gendered barriers in Ireland, especially as we think of her predecessors such as Belinda McKeon, even Edna O'Brien.

My Brilliant Friend was not a hit with my Gen Z students, but I think it's a fascinating television adaptation. As a coming-of-age story spanning decades, we see a friendship from post-World War II Naples to the present day. Of course, Elena Ferrante's authorship is already shrouded in mystery, but her strong involvement in the series is equated with a sense of fidelity to the original. Worldbuilding gets linked to traditionally masculinist genres, but to me, *Friend* is a sprawling epic, and the worldbuilding is phenomenal. Interestingly, when I show the series, students critique the Italian neorealism influence of the first series. It seems too miserable and sad for them. I have thought about screening another season or episode, but jumping in too far along into such an interwoven story seems like a disservice to the text. There is so much to screen, but I like to take a step back sometimes and focus on

one text, or a few, in one class – really get into the seriality as well. These are some common issues with teaching TV already.

IP: I last taught “Women and Television” in Spring 2022, and I centered it around my book, *Difficult Women on Television Drama*, and sources I cited, such as Elizabeth’s compelling work. What I found challenging is that most students want to write their term papers on series that focus on heroic women rather than more antiheroic ones. The course itself leans into more complicated problematic female figures, some of whom are hard to like by design. Student commitment to likability becomes fodder for discussion but only gets folded into their work casually. I keep hearing ‘Goals!’ when I read their final papers. Perhaps this is what they need.

TT: I have not taught a course yet that exclusively focuses on women’s television; however, I try to incorporate learning sessions in my television units that explore different aspects of women’s television and the history of women in front of and behind the camera of different television industries. A problem I tend to find in my classroom when specifically teaching women-centered material is similar to the one described by Elizabeth earlier on: there often still are gendered assumptions about which programs are culturally valuable and worthy of study, which often leads to the subordination of women-centered (and women-authored) programming.

Another challenge I find is more generally related to teaching television in the UK. Many students in the UK are mostly familiar with UK and US programming that has been very popular, substantially discussed in mainstream media, and that they can access easily via online streaming platforms (e.g. BBC iPlayer, Netflix, Disney+, or Now TV, which shows a wide range of HBO shows). However, their access to television content outside such channels is often limited. For instance, I have taught on the history of African American women in US television and explored how we have moved from rather unknown Black writer-producers such as Yvette Denise Lee Bowser (*Living Single*, Fox, 1993–1998) to celebrity show-runners such as Issa Rae (*Insecure*, HBO, 2016–2021) and megaproducers such as Shonda Rhimes (*Grey’s Anatomy*, ABC, 2005–; *Scandal*, ABC, 2012–2018; *How to Get Away with Murder*, ABC, 2014–2020; *Bridgerton*, Netflix, 2020–) and Ava DuVernay (*Queen Sugar*, OWN, 2016–2022; *Colin in Black & White*, Netflix, 2021; *Cherish the Day*, OWN, 2020–). We also watched episodes of *Living Single*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Insecure* and *Queen Sugar* and compared and discussed their on-screen representation of women of color and exploration of racial identity politics. Students were familiar with Shonda Rhimes’s and Issa Rae’s shows (as they have been able to access these programs via online streaming platforms) and with Ava DuVernay’s work in film, but not so much with shows

such as *Living Single* and *Queen Sugar* as both have not gained much attention here in the UK and are not available on streaming platforms. While students seem to have enjoyed *Living Single* and *Queen Sugar*, they felt more comfortable discussing *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Insecure* – shows they were more familiar with and had engaged with more extensively outside a university context. Moreover, most streaming providers don't release box sets anymore, which can also limit the material discussed and screened in our television courses.

JJ: I have not had the opportunity to teach my own class yet, but women's television has come up in several of the classes where I have been a TA, and I have done several guest lectures on the topic. I don't know that this is a challenge per se, but I continually try to impart that a lot of things they read as new in the television landscape actually have much longer histories. When asked about women's authorship on television, many students have difficulty naming an example older than *30 Rock*. In addition to breaking down gendered biases about taste and quality, as others have mentioned, I see my job as giving them a more thorough history of the medium.

SLS: Lastly, what women-led television show have you watched recently where you thought 'that's doing something interesting'?

EA: So, my favorite discovery of the summer has been *Creamerie* (2022–2023), a post-apocalyptic comedy from New Zealand created by JJ Fong, Perlina Lau, Ally Xue, and director Roseanne Liang. (It just returned for a second season on Hulu.) It starts from the premise that men have been wiped out by a Y-chromosome-targeting super-virus but uses this dystopian conceit to offer a really smart and sharp critique of white girl-boss feminism – which it turns out (spoiler alert!) does not offer a path to social harmony! I also just watched the Australian series *Class of '07* (2023), created by Kacie Anning, which takes a similarly gender-segregated set-up – a group of women are stranded at their high school reunion after a massive tidal wave hits the country – and uses this situation to think in provocative ways about women's capacity to uphold the worst aspects of patriarchy. I'm really interested in the rise of these 'women's survival' series – I'm also thinking of *Yellowjackets* and *Y: The Last Man* – and why we seem to be getting so many of them just now.

On a very different note, I also have to mention *Better Things*, Pamela Adlon's dramedy series, which I finally finished watching last year. I find this show fascinating for so many reasons, including the ways in which it amplifies beats and moments that might be considered too 'minor' or low-

key to merit attention in larger-scale dramas. At the same time, the series never hesitates to curtail or interrupt plotlines that don't seem to be serving its protagonist, Sam, even when they're already in progress. I'm particularly interested in the kind of power that Sam is granted within the narrative to pre-empt or shut down unpleasant or potentially harmful encounters – including encounters with men – a phenomenon I've previously termed 'plot-blocking'. For me, *Better Things* offers the fullest range of narrative possibilities to its heroine, and I find it so refreshing.

SM: *Heartstopper* is a genuine and earnest queer teen delight; the second season is out very soon on Netflix. It's also an adaptation from Alice Oseman's original webcomic. Oseman is also the writer and creator of the series.

With women-centered adaptations, I have been reading a lot of the discourse surrounding the failures of adapting Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. The reviews and commentaries are overwhelmingly negative. Yet it seems like it might be a necessary failure to get past doing the work of adapting Butler. I have previously written on *The Handmaid's Tale*, and to my surprise, the series has yet to end. I think continuing these successful prestige series for several seasons is a bit of a shame but a lesson.

A few things will be postponed due to the strike, such as Issa Rae's excellent *Rap Sh!t*.

TT: I really enjoyed the first season of *Rap Sh!t* and its exploration of Miami's rap scene, as well as the often conflicting ways women are seen in the music industry. The show definitely continues Issa Rae's legacy as a showrunner and significant contributor to the growing range of Black female perspectives and experiences in US television.

Another TV show that just recently caught my attention and that I also enjoyed watching is Starz's *Vida* (2018–2020). The series was created by Tanya Saracho and focuses on two estranged Mexican-American sisters who, after the sudden death of their mother, reunite in their home in Boyle Heights, a Hispanic Eastside neighborhood in Los Angeles. The show is not just visually compelling (mixing conventions of cinematographic realism with highly stylized elements such as vivid and intense colors) but also provides an interesting and nuanced perspective on Latinx femininity and queerness, gender identity, and the gentrification of Latinx spaces. Moreover, the show not only offers diversity in front of the camera with an exclusively Latinx cast (which you don't tend to see in US television) but has also become an important creative space for the Latinx community behind the scenes as

Saracho (who herself is Mexican and identifies as queer) hired a predominantly female and queer, exclusively Latinx writers room, as well as Latinx executive producers, directors, editors, directors of cinematography, and casting directors. For me, *Vida* offers a very nuanced perspective on the Latinx LGBTQ+ community and serves as a great example to illustrate the importance of intersectional authorship in US television. As Stefania has pointed out earlier, racial and ethnic inclusion in US television is still the exception and not the rule, and that is why shows such as *Vida* are so important as they not only provide visibility of marginalized groups and their culture on our television screens but also give them creative opportunities behind the scenes to tell their stories and talk about their diverse experiences.

IP: Theresa's spot-on description of the series is the reason I loved and wrote about *Vida* as a racially conscious female production. I'd love to see Tanya Saracho get more chances, and am looking forward to *15 Candles*, which she's developing with Gabriela Revilla Lugo and Selena Gomez for Peacock.

Over the past year, I've been watching a lot of horror films for my current project, so the only women-led show that stands out is *The Diplomat*, a thriller starring Keri Russell. I'm grateful to [Susan Bordo's Substack](#) discussion of Russell's character, in conjunction with Sarah Lancashire's character on Season 3 of *Happy Valley*, whose unkempt appearances have become the object of criticism by other characters, as well as critics, but the criticism fails to daunt the characters themselves, who recognize a gender stereotype when they see one. I love programs that feature child-free women pursuing fulfilling lives, a narrative quality still rare among middle-aged female characters.

JJ: I recently finished all of *Queen Charlotte* on Netflix, which I find interesting both narratively and industrially (and not always in a good way!). Somewhere in me, I have an essay about the cultural work the light-skinned Black woman is doing in romance (*Queen Charlotte*, *High Fidelity*, *Lovesick*, etc.), but that paper will have to wait!

I am regrettably behind on *P-Valley* (Starz), but I can't recommend it enough! Critical discourse about adaptation and women's authorship that moves from the stage to the screen has focused more on the one-woman-show model whose writers are also stars (e.g. Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Michaela Coel). I would love to see more work on playwrights like Katori Hall, who doesn't star in her show but has an active writer/producer role on *P-Valley*.

Finally, I recently finished the third season of *Sweet Magnolias*, another Netflix romance/women's fiction adaptation about three friends in a fictional small town in South Carolina. I think it's too easy to write the series off as regressive nostalgia for an idealized version of the South. I would love to see more writing on this adaptation!

Participant biographies

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Jacqueline Johnson is a PhD candidate in the Division of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She received her BA in Sociology from Boston University and her MA in Media Studies from The University of Texas at Austin. Her current dissertation project examines Black women as both the producers and subjects of romance narratives in television, podcasts, and novels in the U.S. and the U.K. Her work is forthcoming or published in *Sartorial Fandom: Fashion, Beauty Culture, and Identity*, *Watching While Black Rebooted: The Television and Digitality of Black Audiences* and *Rolling: Blackness and Mediated Comedy*. She spends her free time reading celebrity gossip, romance novels, and 'discourse' on Twitter.

Stefania Marghitu is an assistant professor in film and television at the University of Alabama. Her work focuses on feminist media studies with an emphasis on television, authorship, and industry. She is the author of the Routledge television guidebook *Teen TV* (2021). She has published work in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies* and *Communication Culture and Critique*, and the edited collections *White Supremacy and the American Media* and *ReFocus: The Films of Amy Heckerling*. She is currently working on a monograph on women showrunners in US network television.

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Theresa Trimmel is a Lecturer in Film and Television at the University of Bristol. She obtained her PhD in Film Studies from the University of Sussex in 2021. Her research interests lie in popular television; equality and diversity in the film and television industries (in front of and behind the camera); advertising, branding, and marketing of film and television productions; and the manifestations of feminism and postfeminism in popular culture. She is currently working on a monograph for Routledge titled *Female Authorship, Feminism, and Contemporary Women-Centred Television: When Women Run the Show*.

Disclosure statement

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

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