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The cruel optimism of the good wife: the fantastic working mother on the fantastical treadmill

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The Cruel Optimism of *The Good Wife*:
The Fantastic Working Mother on the Fantastical Treadmill

Television & New Media Special Issue on *The Good Wife*

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Abstract

This paper juxtaposes *The Good Wife's* (*TGW*) representation of Alicia Florrick's experience as a professional woman and a mother, against interview accounts of middle-class women who left successful careers after having children. I show that *TGW* furnishes a compelling fantasy based on (1) the valorization of combining motherhood with competitive, long hours high-powered waged work as the basis for a woman's value and liberation, and (2) an emphasis on women's professional performance and satisfaction as depending largely on their individual self-confidence and ability to "lean in", while marginalizing the impact of structural issues on women's success and workplace equality. This fantasy fails to correspond to women's lived experience, but shapes their sense of self in painful ways. The *TGW* fantasy thus involves a relation of "cruel optimism": it attracts women to desire it while impeding them from tackling the structural issues that are obstructing realization of their desire.

Introduction

Inspired by sexual scandals involving political figures such as Bill Clinton, Dick Morris and Eliot Spitzer, *The Good Wife (TGW)* seeks to un-silence the wife mutely standing beside her public figure husband as he apologizes for scandalous misconduct (see Suzanne Leonard's essay here). Similarly to previous television programmes, such as *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004-12), *TGW* seeks to destabilize "some of the most pernicious mythologizing of contemporary female experience" (Negra 2004, n.p.). In particular, in depicting its lead character, Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies), as a high-powered attorney and mother, the show punctures idealized notions of "good mothering" as predicated on asexuality and domesticity, while simultaneously probing the myth of women "having it all." Thus, alongside other contemporary representations, the show contributes to ameliorating the inconsistency between "the public perception of ideal motherhood and the much more complicated (and often harsher) realities of everyday life" (Walters and Harrison 2014, 39).

This article explores the relationship between *TGW*'s representations and the lived experience of motherhood and work. By juxtaposing the show's construction of Alicia's experience as a professional woman and a mother, against interview accounts of middle-class women who quitted successful careers after having children, I show that *TGW* furnishes a fantasy about working mothers in the contemporary workplace. While the women I interviewed were deeply disillusioned by their attempt to combine motherhood and demanding careers, leaving paid employment was not a free, unconstrained choice. They were fully aware of the privilege of being able to make the choice to quit their jobs, but felt it was forced on them by a confluence of factors over

which they had limited control (Orgad 2016). Thus, as I will argue, *TGW* represents a compelling fantasy: the alternative scenario that they have “failed” to live, of happily and successfully combining career and motherhood. This fantasy fails to correspond to women’s lived experience, but nourishes their (re)constructions of the past and dreams of future lives and shapes their sense of self in rather painful ways.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, I situate *TGW* within the current resurgence of feminism and renewed public discussion in US and UK popular culture about women combining motherhood and careers. I discuss accounts that see this new “moment” as hopeful versus critiques that regard the attention to high-powered mothers and the “new mediated maternalism” (McRobbie 2013) as inextricably connected to the rising neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2014b). Next, I introduce the study and its objective to empirically examine the relationship between *TGW*’s representation and stay-at-home mothers’ (SAHMs’) lived experience of motherhood and work. The main part of the paper provides an analysis of *TGW* juxtaposed against interview accounts of SAHMs. In the first section I examine two tenets of *TGW*’s representation of Alicia Florrick as a working mother: (1) the valorization of combining motherhood with competitive, long hours, high-powered waged work as the primary basis for a woman’s sense of achievement, value and liberation, and (2) an emphasis on women’s professional performance and satisfaction as depending largely on their individual self-confidence and ability to “lean in,” and as a consequence, marginalization of the impact of structural issues on women’s success and workplace equality. The second section of the analysis contrasts *TGW*’s construction with women’s own accounts of their experience as working mothers who left paid employment. I conclude by arguing that despite *TGW*’s critical force it deflects the question of structural

inequalities, and does not tackle the deep tensions between corporate work cultures and the project of achieving gender equality and true liberation for women.

Aberrant Mother vs Balanced Woman

TGW is a vibrant example of the new luminosity of feminism in popular culture (Banet Weiser 2015; Gill 2016). It both responds and contributes to renewed public discussion of the myth that women can "have it all" and become "empowered" (Gill and Orgad 2016; Banet Weiser 2015; Rottenberg 2014a), and the remarkable visibility of motherhood in current UK and US public spheres (Addison et. al. 2009; McRobbie 2013; Orgad and De Benedictis 2015; Tyler 2011). Quality television is a lively site of such discussion where normative prescriptions of female experience, subjectivity and, particularly, motherhood are probed and unsettled (Negra 2004). Some critics (e.g. Karlyn 2013; Nussbaum 2014; Walters and Harrison 2014) regard the current moment of US television as hopeful insofar as it allows for multiple, messy, non-normative representations of motherhood that break away from the rigid motherhood mystique that marked previous eras. Walters and Harrison (2014) observe the emergence on US television of a new counter-image, of an "aberrant" "unapologetically non normative" mother heroine, who resists male control and normative familialism (38). They refer to *TGW* as one such example, which offers a complex depiction of Alicia as a non-normative good mother who is mature, confident, and "unabashedly sexual and refreshingly professional" (47).¹

Others (e.g. Ault 2013; Orgad and De Benedictis 2015, 2016a; McRobbie 2013; Rottenberg 2014a; 2014b; Tyler 2011) see current popular representations of motherhood as deeply connected to and reinforcing a neoliberal logic. They observe in

current UK and US popular cultures an intensified regulation and governance of the maternal, implicated in the tightening symbiotic relations between contemporary neoliberalism and liberal feminism. The normative “exemplary” woman in this landscape is the “balanced woman” (Rottenberg 2014a): the white, middle-class, upwardly mobile woman who successfully crafts “a felicitous equilibrium between work and family” (Rottenberg 2014a, 155). She must desire both professional success, articulated almost exclusively in terms of a leadership role in the corporate workplace, and personal fulfilment, “which almost always translates into motherhood” (Rottenberg 2014b, 428). Rather than challenging the unequal structures and social pressures in the workplace, home and in society, this “neoliberal feminist subject” (Rottenberg 2014b, 421) looks inwards to change herself, by self-monitoring, self-care, and inculcation of confidence and an entrepreneurial spirit (Gill and Orgad 2016; Rottenberg 2014b). Her ultimate project is to “lean in” and “internalize the revolution,” as Sandberg’s (2013) bestseller cajoles women to do. She has to learn “how to play the corporate game more deftly” and find “better ways of adjusting to [...] business culture, not [trying] to change it” (McRobbie 2013, 134). Thus, rather than a hopeful moment of inclusive representations of the maternal and cultural confusion over motherhood, these authors argue that the “new mediated maternalism” (McRobbie 2013) intensifies gender re-traditionalization (Adkins 1999) and entrenches neoliberal patriarchy and gender inequality.

Popular Representations and Lived Experience of Motherhood and Work

Situated in the context of these debates, this article contrasts *TGW*’s representation of motherhood and work against SAHMs’ accounts of their lived experience. This

exploration is part of a wider study of the relationship between the experience of UK middle-class women who left paid employment after having children, and media, policy and popular culture representations of this experience. Feminist media studies since the mid-1990s have moved away from studying women's lived experience, giving way to an almost exclusive focus on analysis of media texts (Carter and McLaughlin 2011; Gallagher 2014; Grindstaff and Press 2014; McRobbie 2009). My study seeks to refocus on exploring the relations between mediated and lived experience, and the consequences of these relationships for women's feelings, identities and gender power relations. Radway's (1984) seminal study of the connection between the world of the romance and the world inhabited by its women readers was particularly inspiring.

Drawing on women's accounts, I ask whether and how current representations correspond (and crucially fail to correspond) with, and shape, women's lived experiences of motherhood and work. I focus on *TGW* as a popular representation which speaks to wider cultural narratives of motherhood and work, and juxtapose its depiction of the experience of upper-middle class professional mother Alicia Florrick, with the accounts of UK middle-class women who were in professional careers and left after having children. I try to illuminate how *TGW*'s construction of the professional mother Alicia fails to correspond with these women's experiences of work and motherhood, but simultaneously furnishes a fantasy that speaks to and affects their sense of self and dreams of future lives. I draw on Walkerdine (1984) and especially Radway (1984), who show how popular culture allows women to work through emotionally and resolve in fantasy painful experiences, longings and contradictions that they were unable to resolve in reality. Thus, by fantasy I refer to how *TGW* engages with important themes about "what might be" in ways that make these themes meaningfully

relate to and connect with women's experiences and desires. Importantly, following Walkerdine (1984) and Radway (1984), I suggest that the fantasy created in *TGW* plays upon wishes already present in the lives of women and that the resolutions offered by the show relate to their wishes and desires, which are themselves shaped and influenced by wider cultural and social forces. However, this is not an audience study insofar as it does not examine reception of *TGW*. I do not argue a direct relation between *TGW* and women's accounts. Rather, I examine the far less direct, often intangible, but meaningful relations between women's lived experience and *TGW* fantasy, by eliciting the connections and tensions between the drama's depiction and women's experience of motherhood and work.

I focus deliberately on the privileged subset of educated, predominantly white middle-class educated women, who could afford to stay in paid employment and buy childcare, but leave their career on becoming mothers. This exit from the workplace seems at odds with the commonsensical popular/neoliberal narratives of women's pursuit of a successful career and motherhood as empowering. They left successful professional careers as lawyers, accountants, engineers, teachers, artists, academics, and became and continued to be SAHMs.

The analysis is based on 25 open-ended, in-depth 90-150 minute interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015, with educated women in their late thirties to early fifties, who were heterosexual, mostly white, living in London, and left paid employment after having children. There are just over two million SAHMs in the UK, 16% of whom are professionals, i.e. approximately 320,000. While UK SAHMs are more likely to be in the lower income group, almost 30% of women who are mothers, who are highly educated and whose partners are in the top earnings quartile, are SAHMs (Paull 2015). A recent

study suggests that among UK families deemed as being in the top 20% based on income, increasing numbers of women leave the workplace to look after their children (Bingham 2014).

Interviewees were recruited in part by emails to members of the parent mailing lists of three London schools, and in part by snowball sampling. The interviews were aimed at exploring women's life trajectories, and the factors that influenced their decisions to exit and not to return to the workforce. They were open-ended to allow interviewees to describe what they considered most central, important and/or difficult in their lives. Interviewees were given a broad description of the study's purpose and asked to recount their life course, from their last couple of years of paid employment to their present situation. They were not questioned about media images or stories *per se*, but some mentioned *TGW* as something they watched. As I explain later, my focus is on how *TGW* circulates as a kind of fantasy, that is, how it shapes their ideas, fantasies, and sense of self. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Many women were remarkably frank, sharing what often were intimate, emotional and painful accounts. Details that might identify interviewees have been removed to guarantee confidentiality and maintain anonymity; the names are pseudonyms.

Preliminary thematic analysis of the interviews identified key themes around motherhood and work. These, in conjunction with the themes discussed in the literature on contemporary representations of motherhood and work, were used to inform analysis of *TGW*. Seasons 1 to 6 were coded for their depiction of Alicia's work environment, work culture, professional performance, household/domestic labor, mothering, structural factors affecting her work, and childcare.² Each season was coded independently by two coders.

A final note on the juxtaposition of a US TV show and the experience of UK women seems necessary. First, *TGW* has been distributed in several European countries including the UK, and also Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, India, Jamaica and China. Second, the show positions its lead character Alicia as a “global mother” (Shome 2011) – a white Western female whose experience is closely linked with modernity and the institutions of capitalism, specifically the workplace and heterosexual marriage. Third, as Tasker and Negra (2007, 13) note, there is a high degree of “discursive harmony” between UK and US representations and cultures. Indeed, my analysis shows that *TGW*’s depiction of the experience of an American working mother in the US seems to enhance the fantastical element of the show for UK SAHMs. The show’s construction of working mothers in the contemporary workplace is based on two central tenets, which I discuss below.

The Good Wife and the Alicia Florrick Fantasy

1. The Good Mother Striding Forward in a Bustling Workplace

TGW valorizes combining motherhood with competitive, long hours, high-powered, waged work as the basis for a woman’s sense of achievement, value and liberation. After her husband’s imprisonment following a political corruption and sex scandal, after thirteen years of stay-at-home motherhood which Alicia describes as “wasted” (S2 E15), Alicia is forced to seek employment. She restarts her career in the prestigious, bustling, dynamic law firm Lockhart/Gardner. She is constantly busy and on the move -- within the space of the firm, between her office, the courtroom, crime scenes, and outdoor meeting places related to the cases she is working on, and the bar she visits after work, where she often continues to discuss work matters. Alicia is often depicted literally

striding forward as she enters the courtroom or the office, a typical movement in popular images of professional mothers, signifying moving ahead, confidence and being “liberated” (Hochschild 1989, 1). She rarely looks tired and is immaculately presented. Her ever-changing “classic-meets-modern” outfits (Soo Hoo 2014) represent “power dressing”, adding to her construction as a powerful, dynamic and “liberated” professional woman (see Taylor Cole Miller’s essay [here](#)). The office designs reinforce the sense of an exciting, dynamic and active workplace: from Lockhart/Gardner’s glamorous offices - hardwood floors, expensive wallpaper, and skyscraper views of Chicago’s skyline, to the later Florrick/Agos offices, designed as an open space with the distinctive chic of a “young hipster start-up” (Stanhope 2013): concrete floors, industrial lighting, brick walls, and minimal furniture. The nature of the work is exciting, competitive and challenging. Alicia deals with a diverse range of often high-profile cases which require mastery of the law, strong analytical skills, and excellent presentation, persuasion and performance abilities. Her career also demands extremely long hours: Alicia is often in the office late at night, leaving home early in the mornings, and working at weekends.

The series depicts some of the difficulty of striking a balance between competitive long-hours work, and family life. Alicia is often shown working in her apartment or the office while her children eat dinner, or engaged in work-related phone calls that prevent her from responding even when her children directly seek her attention (e.g. S5 E7). Her demanding job causes her to miss out on her children’s experiences, from her daughter’s choice of clothes, of which she disapproves, but finds out about too late (S5 E1), to more serious matters like her son’s girlfriend’s abortion which she discovers only months later (S6). At the same time, her maternal commitments at times affect her

work performance: she sometimes misses important meetings because of attending to her children's issues, and is criticized in her peer review for her "leisurely hours" (S2 E7).

Nevertheless, ultimately Alicia manages to enjoy a successful career in a highly competitive, aggressive and demanding work culture and be the "#1 Mom" as stated on the pin placed on her office pencil cup (S5 E9). The work is demanding, but highly rewarding; Alicia is frequently praised by her employers, peers, family and even her opponents for her excellent performance. She comes to recognize her value and gain deep satisfaction from her achievements: "I am happy. I've decided I'm good at my job" she tells Eli Gold (Alan Cumming), her husband's campaign manager (S2 E15). The late hours at the office are depicted as a demanding but also a fun aspect of the job. They are often more relaxed, casual, social and, sometimes, flirtatious and romantic times, involving wine and laughter.

On days when Alicia arrives home in the early evening, she is tired but de-stresses with a glass (or glasses!) of wine, and attends to her children with calm and patience. At work, although highly immersed in her job, she is on-call for her children, the distinctive ringtone of her smartphone "hey mom, pick up the phone" interrupting even the most important work meetings -- a sign of her uncompromised commitment as a mother.

Indeed, despite the conflicts between the demands of work and mothering, Alicia's relationship with her teenage children, Zach (Graham Phillips) and Grace (Makenzie Vega), is strong and characterized by trust, mutual respect, intimacy and honesty. For instance, she suspects Zach watches porn, but overcomes her temptation to check his computer (S1 E2). Similarly, she respects Grace's newfound affair with Christianity, despite its standing against her own beliefs. Alicia shares many intimate moments with

her children: they snuggle up on the sofa in front of the television, engage in difficult, but honest conversations (e.g. concerning their dad's scandalous affair), laugh together, and comfort each other emotionally and physically through frequent hugs and kisses especially with Grace. Zach occasionally helps Alicia with work-related technical computer issues, a collaboration which serves to mitigate instances when her work puts them apart. Alicia and the children do have secrets from each other, but this is always motivated by their interest in protecting each other. For example, the children hide from Alicia the photos of their dad's scandalous affair, and Alicia hides from them her affair with her boss Will Gardner (Josh Charles). And while Alicia's relationship with her children involves tensions, secrets and disappointments – a feature that enhances the realism of the fantasy – these ultimately are resolved and seem to strengthen and deepen their bonding.

2. Leaning In and Cracking the Confidence Code

TGW stresses that women's professional performance and satisfaction depends largely on their individual self-confidence, and marginalizes and deflects the impact of structural issues on women's success and workplace equality. After thirteen years as a SAHM, Alicia seamlessly reinvents herself as an assertive, confident and admirable professional. On her very first case in court (S1 E1), she decides on a different defence strategy and uses different evidence from that provided by her bosses, despite Senior Partner Diane's clear discontent and anger at her decision. Her daring behavior is rewarded: her strategy proves successful, she is promoted to act as second chair in a big case, and receives champagne and flowers from her boss Will and recognition and appreciation from her colleagues. As the drama unfolds, Alicia is shown as increasingly capable of "leaning in": she seeks and speaks her truth (as Sandberg's *Lean In* cajoles

women to do), daring to voice her opinion even if it angers her superiors and colleagues. She makes demands (e.g. salary rise) and disobeys her bosses. In court and in formal meetings outside the office she performs with remarkable confidence and boldness, challenging both her opponents and judges (e.g. S2 E1; S3 E19). With every episode, Alicia becomes more confident, outspoken, assertive and determined to “kick ass”, a phrase she uses repeatedly. She is extremely ambitious, taking on several often very difficult cases, simultaneously -- behavior that is rewarded by success, recognition and promotion and, ultimately, leading her to found her own firm and then run for State’s Attorney.

There are few if any depictions of how childcare, housework, and workplace policies and cultures might have affected Alicia’s successful performance. In the first two years of fulltime work, despite an uneasy relationship with her mother-in-law, Jackie (Mary Beth Peil), Alicia can rely on her to help look after the children. Jackie is frequently shown wearing an apron, cleaning, cooking and tidying the apartment. However, the contribution of her mother-in-law's free and always-available childcare to Alicia’s ability to perform successfully and step up her career is marginalized. When Alicia and Jackie fall out, Alicia appears cool-headed and rather undaunted by the consequences of declining her mother-in-law’s help. “I’ve watched Zach and Grace for two years now” Jackie says. “And I thank you”, Alicia replies, “but I don’t need your help any more... My children are grown. They don’t need your help. But thank you. And I’m glad you got time to spend together” (S2 E21). Indeed, this dismissal of her mother-in-law has little impact on Alicia’s continuing successful performance at work. She hires a nanny and occasionally asks her brother or mother to look after the children. Her apartment

always looks immaculate, but there is scant reference to unpaid and/or paid labor enabling this.³

In contrast to Alicia, the professional performance of minor characters such as lawyer Patti Nyholm (Martha Plimpton) and freelance investigator/stay-at-home dad Andrew Wiley (Tim Guinee) is shown to be affected by childcare. Both Nyholm and Wiley often bring their young children (whose presence is disruptive) to work: Nyholm's young baby cries, and needs to be fed and changed; Wiley's children run around the firm's offices, creating noise and mayhem. However, even in these depictions, childcare is not treated as a substantial factor impeding the ability to do one's job properly. Rather, the scenes tend to be comic, diffusing the serious point about the impact of lack of childcare on work and, in Nyholm's case is used tactically to gain the judge's sympathy (e.g. S2 E21), break up depositions and achieve additional recesses (S3 E22, S4 E22).

Work policies and cultures do not seem to affect Alicia's performance in significant ways either. True, her re-entry into the workforce clearly reveals nepotism. Cary Agos (Matt Czuchry) underscores this bias when he tells her "you wouldn't hire yourself either", which Alicia admits (S5 E14). Similarly, Caitlin D'Arcy (Anna Camp), the niece of Lockhart/Gardner's equity partner David Lee (Zach Grenier), gets a job at the firm despite Alicia's recommending of her rival candidate (S3 E5). This notwithstanding, from the moment she starts working at Lockhart/Gardner, Alicia proves the decision to hire her was right: she is highly competent, resourceful, confident and "has it in her" as Diane (Christine Baranski), her boss and mentor, tells her (S3 E11). From time to time, she has moments of self-doubt about being a good lawyer and a good mother, but she quickly sloughs them off. Even at her lowest, most painful moments after stepping down from the State's Attorney role, and suspecting her former colleagues of deception in

expressing their interest in her return to the firm, Alicia is “leaning in”. She follows the advice of her husband, Peter (Chris Noth) to: “say nothing, plaster a smile on your face, and get them to void your exit deal so that you can turn around and fleece them for more” (S6 E20). Peter’s advice to Alicia is reminiscent of Sandberg’s advice to women in *Lean in*, and popular exhortations to women to fake confidence (Gill and Orgad 2016) as a tactic “necessary to reach for opportunities” (Sandberg 2013, 34).

Women’s Lived Experience and the Cruel Optimism of the Alicia Fantasy

In what follows I show how *TGW* largely lacks correspondence with the experience of work and motherhood of the women I interviewed, but nevertheless offers a compelling and persuasive fantasy which has an immense disciplinary force over women’s sense of self and penetrates the way they imagine and judge their experience. Thus, the *TGW* fantasy involves what Berlant (2011) calls a relation of “cruel optimism”: it attracts women to desire it while in fact impeding them from tackling the structural issues that are obstructing realization of their desire. The discussion is deliberately structured against the two tenets discussed above, to show how the experience of my interviewees is significantly shaped by and responds to the fantasy of Alicia.

1. The “Natural” Balanced Woman and the Sinking Feeling of an Unbalanced Life

In contrast to the *TGW* fantasy, the women I interviewed, who were mothers of young children at crucial points in their careers, were deeply disillusioned and disempowered by their attempts to combine motherhood with a high-powered career. The long-hours overwork culture in which Alicia seems to thrive, constituted one of the fundamental obstacles to their ability and desire to continue their careers.

For example, Tanya, a former law firm partner and now a SAHM of two girls, describes her work experience before having children as very similar to Alicia's: demanding, intense, all-consuming long-hours, but fun, interesting, rewarding and "sexy":

It was lots of fun...It's very sexy, there's lots going on... you're working in an environment that's in the news and it's great fun and lots of young people doing the same as you...You go to lots of events that are really interesting, you meet really interesting people and it was great. But it is a lot of pressure and it is a lot of work, and you have to work hard, but you don't mind that because everyone's doing that. And that's what you're used to, that's your life. I'd never leave work before eight or nine o'clock. I remember often, you'd be in until like midnight, and that was just normal, or you'd stay and work until 23.00.

However, the allure of this work culture changed dramatically after Tanya had children:

Once you've got a life outside of that [work], you sort of take a step back and you realise that is a crazy way to live, and you can't live like that and be sane, and have a normal home-life...There's lots of female partners at work who have two nannies, a day and a night nanny... so they'd see their kids at weekends or while they were asleep. I was just like: I really don't want to do that. There was a total mood shift from within me... And then at weekends you're exhausted. So then there'd be events that you had to go to, which when you're 28, if someone says "would you like to go to a black tie at a fancy place?" you go: "Yeah!" But when you want to go home and see your kids, or just go home, you just think: I can't think of anything worse. I've got to go home and get a dress on, I have to go and smile at people all night and make... and I've got to find a cab and get home, and you just have this sinking feeling of...that's not fun anymore.

Tanya's account of her work experience before having children as radically different from that after having children is characteristic of many interviewee accounts. Contra to the Alicia-type fantasy of the mother who smoothly switches off, relaxes and attends to her children (with only wine to ease the transition) as she returns home after a working day, many of the women I interviewed recounted coming home after a long day of work, exhausted, worn out and stressed. Paula, a former lawyer and a SAHM of two children for the last nine years, reflects:

I would be really often in a foul mood when [laughs]... at the end of the day. Because I was just exhausted, you know, mentally exhausted. Yeah, it was... it was... I wasn't [pauses]... I'm not a natural, kind of, um... I'm not [pauses]... probably not as patient as I should be with young children... so I did find it, yeah, quite, um, [silence] wearing. It's very difficult, isn't it? Your feelings are so... my [pauses]... it's so hard to sum it up...it's so, um...

The silences, stuttering, laughter and incomplete sentences are testimony to Paula's struggle to articulate her feelings about the end of long working days. These feelings derived not simply from exhaustion, but from guilt about it. Paula feels inadequate, and implicitly judges herself against that "other woman" who, unlike her, is "a natural". While Paula does not connect her feelings in a direct way to *TGW*, I would argue that such troublesome feelings, which were expressed by many of my interviewees, should be situated in relation to the powerful fantasy nourished by popular representations such as *TGW*. It is imaginary women like Alicia, who are constructed as the "natural" "balanced woman" (Rottenberg 2014a), capable of switching off after a stressful day and attending to her children with patience and affection, against whom women judgmentally compare and often denigrate themselves. Interviewees frequently

referred to that “other woman” who is able to achieve that “magic balance”, but when asked for concrete examples, they often struggled to produce one.

Alicia is capable of successfully crafting the “work-home felicitous balance” (Rottenberg 2014a) partly because she is the mother of teenagers who are far less demanding than young children awaiting their exhausted mothers after a working day. Alicia reaps the rewards of being a SAHM to her children when they were young, in the form of strong and deep relationships with her teenage offspring and is “spared” guilt about not being with them sufficiently in their crucial formative years (Orgad 2016). However, the women I interviewed spoke of enormous sadness and feelings of guilt at leaving their children to be cared by others for very long periods. Watching their young children sleeping on arriving home late from work was a painful and difficult experience, not the “sweet” scene depicted in *TGW* and other popular representations. Missing considerable parts of their children’s everyday development, especially in the first years of their lives and under the pressures of a culture of “intensive parenting,” had been unbearable. Equally, performing to high standards in extremely-demanding jobs following sleepless nights attending to young children was extremely difficult. The burden of getting up at night to attend to children was rarely shared by their husbands and partners, making sleep deprivation a feature of many women’s lives during the child's first few years. This has serious impacts on their performance, satisfaction and well-being. Thus, while *TGW* might be commended for eschewing the “woman on the phone, holding a crying baby” (Sandberg 2013, 49) cliché, its focus on the experience of a mother of older children enables the “felicitous home-work balance” fantasy (Rottenberg 2014a) and does not correspond with the reality of the majority of women for whom important career stages coincide with care for young rather than older children.

However, despite my interviewees' clear recollection of work conditions that were deeply incompatible with motherhood, Alicia's immaculate juggling of a flourishing career and motherhood remains a powerful fantasy that reconstructs women's sense of self. Interviewees frequently reminisced about their "professional" and "glamorous" style when they were in paid employment, and (re)constructed their experience in the workplace as "fun," "exciting," "extremely rewarding" "liberating" and "brilliant." The majority of the women I interviewed wanted to return to paid employment and to "reinvent" themselves, as one of them put it, like Alicia Florrick did. However, none was keen to return to their former intensive, long-hours, competitive work environments. Yet they were not able to describe what might be an alternative work or job to return to: "We're all looking for that perfect elusive job" and "that magic profession," "that we can do between nine and three [and] would give us satisfaction and pay lots of money." The fantasy of female empowerment and liberation seems to be so narrowly articulated in contemporary popular culture as combining motherhood with professional success in the full-time long-hours workplace, that any alternative is "elusive" and very difficult to imagine.

I find it curious that the experience of an American woman in a US workplace furnishes such a compelling fantasy, given the critical view some interviewees expressed of American work culture. Nearly half of my interviewees referred to the US in the context of their former workplaces and/or their husbands' workplaces, which had been taken over or strongly influenced by American companies. Most women saw this influence as negative: "Americans don't quite realize that we need to go to home too, you know!" commented Sara, a former client director in a global-American firm and a SAHM of two. She related how because of American firms' "very positive, very hard working" culture

and as a result of the time zone differences, which meant that US colleagues started their working day when she and her colleagues in the UK were about to finish theirs, she was frequently under immense pressure and obliged to work very late hours. Dana, a former arts festival director, felt that the UK government's pressure on women to return to work at the expense of caring for their children until an older age, is an "enormous social experiment" influenced by the American model, which "skews our [British] values."

However, the potency of the *TGW* fantasy is potentially partly because it is American. Radway's observation in relation to romance is instructive here. Radway (1984, 203) argues that the fictional characterization of the romantic fantasy was successful for the Smithton women she interviewed because

it manages to convince them that even though they know the characters are more perfect than they or their husbands can ever hope to be, they are yet entirely persuasive and believable as possible human individuals. The women can thus believe in them and in the verity of the happy ending that concludes the story.

Similarly, it seems to me that *TGW*'s depiction of American work culture, which is congruent with what the women I interviewed *believe* it to be, that is, with their fantasy of American work culture, allows for Alicia's fantastical story of female empowerment to be persuasive and believable. Like the romance, *TGW* allows women to resolve in fantasy those longings and contradictions that they were unable to resolve in reality.

The fantasy Alicia represents is perhaps rendered most persuasive by the circumstance that facilitated her empowerment, namely her husband's prison sentence. It is his withdrawal from the breadwinner role which forces Alicia to return to paid employment, and unleashes her suppressed desires, allowing realization of her professional aspirations. Several interviewees described strikingly similar circumstances of husbands being made redundant, as providing a window of opportunity for their return to the workplace. For example:

I actually have to say that I felt quite excited about the prospect because it was forced on me – do you know what I mean? ... If I had to do it, it would be quite exciting, I suppose. In a way, it's having the choice of it... (Susan, former medical doctor)

If I'd known, when he was made redundant that he was going to be off for a year, that would have been fantastic. Okay, let me get a job! Anything! If I'd had that, sort of, knowledge then, that would have been great, maybe, to have taken that, and had him at the helm." (Maggie, former senior media producer).

However, the "exciting" (Susan) "fantastic," "great" (Maggie) moment did not arrive; for these women the window of opportunity closed when their husbands found a new job. In this sense *TGW* seems simultaneously to unleash and re-contain female desire (McRobbie 2009, 6) in implying that only the condition of temporarily removing male power allows the woman to express and realize her desire. For Alicia's and the SAHMs' desire to be unleashed male power is required to be externally challenged rather than their contributing actively to its dismantling.

2. Leaning In, Bearing the Brunt, and Self-Denigration

Like Alicia Florrick, my interviewees are talented, smart women who had huge professional ambition and a strong sense of professional success. They took considerable pleasure and pride in their professional accomplishments, in progressing in their career, and in earning money. Some were earning more than their male partners when they left the workplace. They were confident, excelled at their jobs and enjoyed the work. Also, like Alicia, they take great pleasure and pride and invest substantial labor in mothering.

However, unlike Alicia, their experience in the workplace and consequent decision to leave it depended on a confluence of personal and psychological, but significantly also structural factors, including: institutional (e.g. discrimination, workplace policies, denials of requests to work part-time, pay gap, relocations), cultural (e.g. social perceptions), political (e.g. policies and law), and economic (e.g. affordable good quality childcare). Self-confidence and “leaning in” proved insufficient to overcome the rigid structural factors that ultimately led to the momentous decision to quit their jobs.

In the space available here I cannot explore all these structural factors (see Orgad 2016; Jones 2012; Stone 2007). As discussed in the previous section, the women's and their partners' long-hours intensive work conditions, which were incompatible with family life, were important influences on the decision to leave paid employment. In this section I briefly discuss two additional factors: childcare and unequal household work. I focus on these since they were mentioned repeatedly in my interviews, but are rendered mostly invisible in *TGW*.

Although the women I interviewed were able to afford childcare, and many were generally satisfied with the childcare arrangements they put in place, the burden of finding and managing childcare was almost exclusively theirs. Taking time off to nurse

sick children, take them to medical appointments, attend their nursery and school activities and ferry them to social activities, were almost always the woman's "job." Even if the woman occupied a similar high-powered position as her husband, the unequal distribution of labor stubbornly persisted. As Tanya, a former partner in a law firm, whose husband does the same job, recalls:

[At work], from 4 o'clock onwards you're just like, oh my god, how am I going to get out of here? And then suddenly I had to leave by quarter to 7.00pm at the latest to get home. And my nanny worked until 7.30pm, so that was quite late. She'd been there since 8.00 in the morning until 7.30pm [...] I could phone and say I need to work late, but also it was always on me to sort out the childcare. You know, my husband just carried on in his normal life. That was part of my role.

None of the women I interviewed enjoyed the availability of parents or extended family to care for their children on a regular basis. Most lived very far away from their extended families, had elderly parents and parents-in-law who could not supply regular help or did not have living parents or in-laws.

In addition to the very limited contribution of husbands to childcare, the wholly unequal distribution of household labor further inhibited women's professional progress and affected their eventual decision to quit their jobs. While they all employed cleaners, day-to-day management of the household was predominantly their responsibility and was especially onerous at the end of the working day. Sonya, a former accountant, recalls how she "hated it, coming in to an absolute mess at the end of the day. The kitchen [had to be] cleaned, picking up after the children, so it's always an hour or so at the end of the day, that kind of stuff".

In contrast, as I have shown in the discussion of *TGW*, the toll of housework labor and childcare on women's experience of career and motherhood is invisible. Thus, while as Suzanne Leonard's essay here explores, *TGW* boldly critiques the institution of marriage (e.g. by exposing how both Alicia and Peter maintain their marriage only for the sake of their careers), it at the same time ignores the huge impact of the "banal" gender inequalities in daily married life, particularly in relation to childcare and housework, on women's careers and motherhood experience.

Although interviewees described a confluence of factors that affected their experiences of work and motherhood and led to their leaving and not returning to work, they frequently explained this decision as due ultimately to their "lack of ambition" and failure to successfully "lean in." For example, Susan had studied medicine and begun training in clinical genetics, but abandoned her dream of becoming a geneticist and became a GP in deference to her husband's demanding job in the financial sector. Following their relocation for his job to another country, she quit work altogether and, for the last 11 years, has been a SAHM to four children. It was largely due to her husband's long-hours job that Susan left the workforce and has not returned to work: "He goes to work too early and comes back too late [...] we were always going to be driven by his job," she explained. Yet despite her clear account of the huge influence of her husband's career on her work life, she repeatedly referred to her being "never very ambitious." When I asked, "How come you're saying that you're not very ambitious, after studying for so many years, practising medicine and planning to become a clinical geneticist?" Susan responded:

I think partly because that's what I [pauses]... I mean, I think if I'd been really ambitious I wouldn't have given it up, really. But, yes, I suppose it is a bit

contradictory. But [pauses]... yes, it is a bit contradictory as well [laughter].
[Silence]. Yes, I think [pauses], I think if I'd been really ambitious I would have, I
would have... just said I wasn't going to go to take care [of the children] and I
would have carried on, you know.

Susan's account vividly illustrates the huge imprint of the fantasy of the ambitious "balanced woman" on women's feelings and sense of self. The many pauses, silences, incomplete sentences and laughter in such a short quote, in my view capture the real struggle to articulate this experience outside of and against the "lean in" confidence/ambition narrative. Precisely because of their realistic dimension, idealized images such as Alicia Florrick (or Sheryl Sandberg), provide an enormously powerful framework for women's making sense of their own experience and for denigrating themselves when these images do not match with or contradict their lived realities. Susan knows that leaning in and being "really ambitious", like Alicia, is a fraught and fragile solution, yet it remains attractive because in the current cultural landscape it is identified as the central resolution to the "problem" of women's success.⁴ However, just as the cultural ideal of the "supermom" or the "superwoman" who admirably juggles a successful career and motherhood has led "many to live beyond their emotional means", (Hochschild 1989, 264), so too the current ideal of the "balanced woman" may be similarly overloading women like those I interviewed with "emotional debt" (ibid.): a fantasy they are unable but continuously try to line up with.

Conclusion

In *TGW*'s fifth season Alicia prepares a speech about being an "opt-out" mom returning to the workplace (E14). Her male colleagues, Cary and Clarke (Nathan Lane), who hope to use Alicia's speech to bring clients to their new law firm, advise her to "just play up the feminism angle" and play up her "story as one of female empowerment." Alicia initially is hesitant about following her male colleagues' advice, but ultimately produces a keynote that reinforces and celebrates the female empowerment fantasy. The scene encapsulates *TGW*'s critical commentary on the current purchase of the "feminist" "female empowerment" narrative and its corporate co-optation. As discussed in the section "*The Good Wife* and the Alicia Florrick Fantasy," the show probes the myth of the woman who "has it all" and exposes aspects of the difficulty of striking a balance between competitive long-hours work and family life, and their consequences.

At the same time, examined through the accounts of the lived experiences of women who tried to "have it all," *TGW* seems largely to reinforce that fantasy of female empowerment – a fantasy which serves patriarchal capitalism. The realism of this fantasy nourishes women's desire, while simultaneously highlighting "a deep-seated sense of betrayal" (Radway 1983, 60) and disappointment because they failed to live up to it. Somewhat similarly to Radway (1984) in her analysis of the romance, and Negra (2004) in her critique of *Sex in the City*, I conclude that notwithstanding the critical force of *TGW*, it "leaves unchallenged the very system of social relations whose faults and imperfections gave rise" to the show, and which *TGW* "is trying to perfect" (Radway 1984, 215). *TGW* suggests that combining career success and "good" mothering is a fulfilling and liberating experience, whose realization relies largely on women's commitment to changing themselves: Alicia successfully "re-invents" herself as a professional woman after 13 years as a SAHM. The corporate workplace and its long-

hours, demanding and competitive culture appear to promote, not inhibit, her successful performance, career progression and self-fulfilment. This fantasy, largely contradicted by my interviewees' experience of the workplace, valorizes and reinforces the spirit of "neoliberal feminism" (Rottenberg, 2014b): it promotes the idea that the contemporary, feminist, "empowered" subject accepts full responsibility for her self-realization and self-care by crafting a "felicitous work-family balance." It implies that women, such as the SAHMs I interviewed, who "fail" to craft this fantastical felicitous balance, have only themselves to blame. Like Radway's romance, *TGW* ultimately "avoids questioning the institutionalized basis of patriarchal control over women even as it serves as a locus of protest against some of its emotional consequences" (Radway 1984, 217). Specifically, *TGW* avoids confronting the deep tensions between corporate (over)work culture and the possibility of achieving gender equality both at work and in the home. In the absence of sufficient popular representations that deal with these tensions and structural inequalities, women may find it hard if not impossible to account for their experience other than through and in relation to the experience of that (imaginary) "other woman" who with confidence and ambition manages, despite obstacles, to "internalize the revolution" and realize herself both professionally and personally as a mother. This fantasy of the good mother on the energizing treadmill creates a relation of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011): it ignites a sense of possibility and continues to attract women to desire it while in fact impeding them from tackling the structural inequalities in their homes, workplaces and society, that are obstructing realization of their desire.

In the conclusion to *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1984, 220) asks how, as feminist researchers, we might help develop strategies to encourage protest "in such a way that

it will be delivered in the arena of actual social relations rather than acted out in the imagination.” This article is a modest attempt to contribute to this project, which seems ever more urgent, three decades since the publication of Radway’s study. By voicing women’s accounts of their lived experience, dissatisfactions and desires and juxtaposing them against their popular representation in *TGW*, I hope their silenced accounts to be acknowledged. However limited, their accounts voice a significant protest against the structural conditions that sustain their inequality and that of many far less fortunate women. Television seems both complicit in these structural conditions and capable of helping to transform them.

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Notes

¹ For a similar journalistic appraisal of the show, see Nussbaum (2014).

² At the time of writing this paper, Season 7 was not available in the UK.

³ For exceptions, see e.g., S3 E11, in which Alicia is shown cleaning and Hoovering the apartment, and S4 E20, when she is washing the dishes.

⁴ See Walkerdine (1984) for a similar argument about how romance acts as a powerful fantasy for girls.