WHITE VULNERABILITY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRODUCTION IN *TOP OF THE LAKE: CHINA GIRL*

JOHANNA GONDOUIN, SURUCHI THAPAR-BJÖRKERT
AND INGRID RYBERG

Top of The Lake: China Girl (Australia, Jane Campion, 2017) is the sequel to Jane Campion and Gerard Lee's crime series *Top of the Lake* from 2013, directed by Campion and Ariel Kleiman. After four years of absence, Inspector Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss) returns to the Sydney Police Force and comes to lead the murder case of an unidentified young Asian woman, found in a suitcase at Bondi Beach. The investigation connects Robin to a group of Thai sex workers, and a network of couples – including two of her closest colleagues – willing to pay these women large sums of money as surrogate mothers via illegal commercial arrangements. Moreover, on her return to Sydney, Robin makes contact with her now teenage daughter Mary (Alice Englert), whom she gave up for adoption at a young age. Worrying links between the murdered girl and Mary are revealed, as it turns out that one of the prime suspects is Mary's boyfriend Puss (David Dencik). The circumstances surrounding the adoption are revealed in season one, set in the fictional town of Laketop, New Zealand. Visiting her dying mother, Robin becomes involved in the investigation of the disappearance of a pregnant twelve-year-old, Tui. The case results in the exposure of a paedophile ring implicating a large number of men in the small community, among others the missing girl's father and the police officer in charge. In the process, Robin's traumatic past unfolds through flashbacks: the gang rape that she was the victim of as a teenager, and the following pregnancy and adoption.

The six episodes of approximately one hour each of *China Girl* were screened at the Cannes film festival in May 2017, and have since been shown on the BBC, Sundance TV, and Swedish national television (SVT),

among others. The first season was a critical success, praised for its visual power, emotional depth, and outstanding acting. The second has also been well received, although slightly less enthusiastically. *China Girl* has been praised by feminist critics for its radical depiction of the experiences of women as well as its ambitious analysis of an insidious rape culture. It has been perceived as more about the complexities of gender politics than police work; as less a detective story than a thought-provoking meditation on motherhood and kinship (Balac, 2017; Budowski, 2017; Pulver, 2013; Vineyard, 2017; Wiegand, 2017). Campion herself has described the series as 'beyond feminism, as something "ovarian"'. She elaborates: 'I wanted to go deep into the uterus of a woman, and really tell the story from that point of view, from creation to appropriation' (Vineyard, 2017). The opening credits dramatically show the penetration of an ova and its subsequent formation into a foetus.

The focus on motherhood is bolstered by both the biographical background and public and fictional personae of Campion and the female leads of the series. The director has been explicit about her own thorny road to motherhood, including three miscarriages and a baby who died. In the series, Campion's real-life daughter Alice Englert plays the role of Mary. There is also the highly mediatised case of Nicole Kidman, cast as Mary's adoptive mother Julia. Kidman is an adoptive mother from her relationship with Tom Cruise and a mother through surrogacy with her current spouse, Keith Urban. In addition, one of Kidman's recent roles was that of the adoptive mother in *Lion* (Australia, Garth Davis, 2016). Elisabeth Moss has portrayed women with painful experiences of motherhood in two of her most acclaimed former appearances: as Peggy Olsen in the series *Mad Men* (US, Matthew Weiner, 2007–15) she has a child out of wedlock that she gives up for adoption, and as the surrogate Offred she is the main character of *The Handmaid's Tale* (US, Bruce Miller, 2017–), the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel from 1985.

Moreover, Campion has pointed out that she was inspired by ongoing debates and specific cases in a different way to her previous work. In an interview in the *New York Times*, Campion mentions two incidents of surrogacy in Thailand that gained global media attention and prompted the government of Thailand to close its borders to foreign couples seeking surrogacy arrangements in the country. The first was the Baby Gammy case of 2014 involving an Australian heterosexual couple who contracted a surrogate in Thailand. The surrogate gave birth to twins – a boy and a girl – but the couple only brought the daughter home with them since the boy was discovered to have Down's syndrome and a congenital heart defect (Howard, 2014). It was further revealed that the father was a convicted sex

offender, having been found guilty of molestation of two girls aged seven and ten. The other case was that of a twenty-four-year-old Japanese businessman who fathered sixteen babies born from surrogates in Thailand in 2014, and planned to have another four. Commercial surrogacy is illegal in Australia, but instead of the usual recourse to offshore surrogacy in low-cost destinations, the arrangements in *China Girl* take place within the country. In the interview, Campion does not take a stance for or against transnational commercial surrogacy, but said she was driven by a curiosity to explore its complexities and highlight different perspectives (Vineyard, 2017). On the contrary, regarding sex work, Campion has been outspoken about her support for its legalisation, implemented in New South Wales since 1988 (Ellis-Petersen, 2017). Nonetheless, unlicensed brothels are estimated to outnumber registered brothels by four to one, and a recent study shows that almost half of those working in brothels are migrants having entered the country on a student visa (Ellis-Petersen, 2017). In the series, the women in the brothel, posing as students and contracted as illegal surrogates, speak to this joining of legal and illegal practices.

Revolving around charged issues such as surrogacy, adoption, and migrant sex workers, interconnecting these different forms of affective and biological labour and situating the notion of motherhood in a larger context of issues of reproductive work, the series offers a rich and complex reflection on the current debate about the global division of reproductive work across axes of gender, race, nationality, migration status, and class (Colen, 1995; Ginsburg and Rapp, 1995; Parreñas, 2000; Shanley, 2001; Vora, 2008; Yngvesson, 2010). However, while critics have recognised motherhood, misogyny, sexism, and gendered violence as central themes in *China Girl*, surprisingly few comments address the racial dynamics in the series (Jones, 2017; Kang, 2017). Swedish artist and activist Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom points out:

Even though the Asian women are victims of exactly the same cruel, patriarchal rape culture, and additionally find themselves both alienated and in serfdom, they remain stiff, onehanded decors in the series' background. Apparently indifferent to their life situations, they, as opposed to their white counterparts, do not break down. They neither cry nor bleed but populate the brothel in passive acceptance. We do not really know what they think of their lives in Australia, or how they feel about suddenly being brought out from the country, pregnant with genetically foreign children. Constantly naked, constantly sexually exposed, their bodies are rolled out like a carpet for the white women to walk on, where these can live out the whole complex register that being a human being entails. It's their feelings that are worth telling. It is when their bodies are raped, their lives risked, their life situations disturbed, that we are supposed to react. (Wool-Rim Sjöblom, 2017, authors' translation)

Wool-Rim Sjöblom's criticism draws attention to the crucial and interconnected functions of emotions and agency in the series, but also to their unequal distribution between the white women and Thai women.

In this chapter, we set out to unpack these racial and emotional dynamics and the series' complex representation of the issue of surrogacy by shedding light on how it sets conflicting notions of vulnerability in motion. We show how articulating emotional vulnerability becomes a resource and springboard for agency and making citizen claims on the part of the series' white intended parents. The physical and material vulnerability and subordination of the Thai sex workers and surrogates, on the other hand, render them no other narrative function than that of passive, objectified victims to be used for the white characters' various purposes. These conflicting notions of vulnerability, we propose, evoke diverging positions in the current debate on transnational commercial surrogacy: a Western liberal notion of reproductive rights on the one hand, and a postcolonial critical notion of reproductive justice on the other. Ultimately, we argue, the series privileges the Western notion of reproductive rights by amplifying the emotional vulnerability of the white characters at the cost of the Thai characters, who remain flat and underdeveloped. Close reading the affective economy of this celebrated quality TV drama created by a white female auteur, our aim is to illuminate the crucial role of vulnerability in the ongoing debate as a vehicle for making transnational commercial surrogacy emotionally and ethically acceptable.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS VERSUS REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Since the late 2000s, transnational commercial surrogacy has developed into a booming global industry, with an increasing number of involuntarily infertile couples travelling from countries in the Global North, where commercial and altruistic surrogacy is either illegal or less affordable, to low-cost countries, where surrogate arrangements are offered for a fraction of the cost (Chavkin and Maher, 2010; Gupta, 2006; Pande, 2010; Sunder Rajan, 2007). As hubs in the Global South such as India and Thailand close their borders, the industry relocates to other countries; Nepal and Laos have recently become popular destinations for transnational surrogacy arrangements. The 'outsourcing' of reproductive labour to women of the Global South adds further layers of complexity to the already controversial practice of surrogacy (Nahman, 2008; Nussbaum, 1998; Ragone and Twine, 2000). In such a moment, cultural productions, such as *China Girl* with its high cultural visibility among audiences in the Global North, contribute

to the cultural meaning making of surrogacy, and potentially shape the perceptions and decisions of those who are considering surrogacy (Riggs and Due, 2010; 2013; van den Akker et al., 2016), as well as surrogacy law and policy (Millbank, 2012).

In Western feminist thought, the notion of reproductive rights, centred around values such as choice and bodily autonomy, have primarily regarded the right to access birth control such as contraceptives and abortion. However, in the current context of declining fertility rates in the Global North, reproduction is increasingly valued (Eng, 2010), and new reproductive technologies (ARTs) enable new claims to reproductive rights (Cohen, 2005; Cooper and Waldby, 2008; 2014). Recent scholarship argues that reproduction is increasingly perceived as a marker of citizenship by providing the ground for social participation and claims to social resources (Turner, 2001; 2008: 46). In this context, reproductive rights, which are enshrined in the UN declaration of human rights, can be interpreted as having a child being a human right (Turner, 2008: 52). In *China Girl*, such an understanding of reproductive rights as human rights is explicitly expressed by the couple Felicity and Mike. The language of human rights is a potent discourse in the Global North, not only for straight couples but increasingly for marginalised groups fighting legal discrimination, such as LGBTQ people, disabled people, and single parents.

The notion of reproductive rights as a matter of individual choice has been heavily criticised in black and postcolonial feminism, by some deemed to constitute a new form of discursive colonialism (Bailey, 2011; Mohanty, 2003), which negates the ways in which socio-economic contexts and geopolitical locations shape women's reproductive options (Twine, 2015). 'For many women, contract pregnancy is one of the few routes to attaining basic social goods such as housing, food, clean water, education and medical care,' Alison Bailey (2011: 722) argues. While infertility is more widespread in the Global South and marginalised communities in the Global North, privileged white women are the major beneficiaries of ARTs. In neo-liberal logic, the transformation of the desire to procreate into the right to reproduction is conceptualised as an issue of entrepreneurship and consumer rights. Examining neoliberal discourses in cases of transnational surrogacy, Krølokke and Pant develop the concept of 'repropreneur', whereby reproductive actors make choices that, 'maximize their chances of pregnancy and upward mobility, while simultaneously turning reproductive matter into particular types of commodities' (2012: 234). In *China Girl*, Felicity and Mike come across as paradigmatic examples of reproductive citizens able to draw on their 'entrepreneurial qualities' and financial capacities in order to invest both materially and emotionally in reproductive choices.

Dorothy Roberts and other feminists of colour draw attention to how childbearing by wealthier women is encouraged and bolstered through the use of advanced technological interventions, while lacking financial resources, public policy measures, invasive and abusive medical and surgical procedures, or forced child removal prohibit the motherhood of poor women of colour (Roberts, 1996: 944). Furthermore, scholars such as Kalindi Vora (2012) and France Winddance Twine (2015) have drawn attention to how the current market in reproductive labour is refigured by the US slave economy and other forms of colonial indentured labour.

Challenging and nuancing the Western liberal notion of reproductive rights, the concept of 'reproductive justice' was coined in the early 1990s by SisterSong, a grassroots collective of women of colour in the United States. Merging reproductive rights with social justice, reproductive justice was launched in order to address 'how race- and class-based histories of population control, sterilisation abuse, high-risk contraception, poverty, and the effects of environmental pollution on fertility and maternal health shaped the reproductive lives of the third world (as well as women of colour in the first world)' (Bailey, 2011: 727; see also Rao, 2010; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Going beyond liberal frameworks centred on women's individual autonomy and choice, this approach to ARTs and surrogacy extends the conversation to include the reproductive rights, social justice concerns, and human rights of women outside hegemonic feminism (Mohapatra, 2012). Taking India as an emblematic example, Twine – speaking of a 'fertility caste system' – and Vora argue that contemporary practices of transnational surrogacy extract and transfer value from poor, lower castes to wealthy nationals, foreigners and privileged upper castes (Banerjee, 2014; Twine, 2016; Vora, 2012). Reproductive rights and reproductive justice are conflicting perspectives, as 'the reproductive privileges of some women depended on the reproductive disciplining of other women in ways that did not challenge racism or other vehicles of inequality' (Ross and Solinger, 2017: 65). In both perspectives, the notion of vulnerability is central yet mobilised in different ways.

Literature focused on the surrogate mother and the child largely concerns the economic and educational vulnerability of surrogates, particularly their potentially limited alternative financial options (Damelio and Sorensen, 2008; Pande, 2010; Rao, 2004: 251; Rudrappa, 2012; Twine, 2015; Vora, 2009), as well as their medical vulnerability and exposure to the risk of maternal deaths (Bailey, 2011: 729). On the other hand, Damien Riggs and Clemence Due (2013; 2014) draw attention to the 'reproductive vulnerability' of intended parents, highlighting what they perceive as a lack of attention to the various intersections between 'differing vulnerabilities'. They build on the abovementioned increasing value attached to reproduction, and argue that people who are reproductively vulnerable are those who

are unable to reproduce via heterosexual intercourse either due to medical infertility or 'social infertility' (Boivin et al., 2001). 'To be outside the norm of reproductive heterosex then is to be vulnerable to the diminishment of one's cultural capital as a reproductive citizen' (Riggs and Due, 2013: 957). In her analysis of the Norwegian debate on surrogacy, Unn Conradi Andersen (2012) points out how relatively privileged groups have picked up on the language of marginalised groups in their struggle for recognition and rights to reproduction. Positioning oneself as victim in relation to the state is also recurrent in Swedish ART discourses as well as in pro-surrogacy discourses (Arvidsson et al., 2015; Gondouin, 2015).

Our analysis draws from Judith Butler's understanding of vulnerability as both a common human condition and as relational and depending on one's positionality within a multilayered field of power (Butler, 2014: 5). Butler discusses how 'dominant groups can use the discourse of "vulnerability" to shore up their own privilege'. In this instance, 'it is their privilege which has become "vulnerable" to being undone by increasing demands for equality and freedom' (Butler, 2014: 16). Such use of vulnerability, Butler elaborates, effaces the condition of vulnerability in which precarious populations live, and constitutes an ideological seizure of the term to expand and rationalise inequalities. In our reading of *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, we demonstrate how the emphasis on the reproductive vulnerability of the white intended parents precisely effaces the precariousness of the Thai women's lives.

PASSIVE VICTIMS AS NARRATIVE BACKDROP

In both seasons of *Top of the Lake*, a pregnant Asian female is driving the narrative. In season one it is pregnant preteen Tui's attempt to drown herself that starts off the investigation leading to the exposure of the paedophile network. In season two, a dead Thai woman, Padma, found in a drifting suitcase, subsequently discovered to be pregnant, leads to the unravelling of migrant sex workers contracted as surrogate mothers. When asked if there is a deeper meaning to the depiction of these Asian women as victims, Campion claims she wanted to challenge the widespread idealisation of Asian femininity as 'more petite, more beautiful, more feminine than us big white women ... It's a common thing for some men who find women to be too difficult, to get what they hope will be a submissive woman. It doesn't really work out that way, because they aren't that submissive' (Vineyard, 2017). However, the portrayal of the Thai women in the series does very little to counter dominant stereotypes. Instead, we argue, it invokes a fetishising notion of the vulnerability of South East Asian female bodies as available, consumable for sexual and reproductive labour, and ultimately disposable.

Aestheticised images of the suitcase floating in the water, with long black hair leaking out of it, are recurrent in the first episode. Examining the distorted corpse, it is this hair, determined by the forensic pathologist to be of Asian texture, that inspires the police operation's official code name – the exoticizing 'China Girl', which is also the name of the whole season.¹ The objectification of Asian female bodies continues throughout the series, as pointed out by Sjöblom, with the young Thai women consistently seen half-naked and sexually exposed. As commodities available for sexual consumption, they are recurrently rated in derogatory racist and misogynist terms by a group of young men reviewing the brothel's website in a café. Eager to serve whoever turns out to be the customer, the series reproduces the image of the sexually available, servile South East Asian woman-as-prostitute, a dominant stereotype of Asian women in Hollywood Cinema instated by iconic performances in Vietnam war films such as Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) (Prasso, 2005). In addition to the submissive and hypersexual Thai prostitute, these young women also come across as another stereotypical image of the third world woman: the passive, silent victim, whose lack of agency allows the Western feminist subject to define herself as agentic and politically conscious and progressive (Mohanty, 2003). The women at the brothel form an anonymous, silent collective. It is telling that their names are rarely mentioned in the dialogue.

The main function of these women, we argue, is to serve as the background against which the white protagonists' profiles are drawn. Our reading hence resonates with the postcolonial critique of Campion's Palme d'Or winning film *The Piano* (Australia, 1993). Reshela DuPuis (1996: 62), among others, scrutinises the film's colonialist politics and representation of Maori land and characters primarily as a backdrop to the white characters and their relationships with each other. In *China Girl*, a case in point is a scene in which Puss, who lives in a room above the brothel where he offers the Thai women English lessons, has the women recite: 'No one ever gives away power, power has to be taken,' before proceeding to phrases such as 'Wow, your cock is huge.' In another scene, one of the women explains: 'He [Puss] teach us we're victims, oppressed, we need to be strong.' The lessons function as a pretext for Puss to impose his political ideas. It is he, the white male, who informs these young women of colour about their precarious condition and the most efficient ways to deal with it, a condition that they are neither shown to be aware of and even less able to critically address themselves. They are not afforded any agency of their own, but have to be taught by the white saviour. Another example is one of the few scenes in which dialogue in Thai is translated into English: the women discuss Puss's confrontation with Mary's upper-middle-class parents, Julia and Pyke, who

openly disapprove of their daughter's relation with a man of dubious social standing twice her age. The women express concern for him not having eaten for days and are worried that he might try to kill himself. The main function of the scene is to give crucial information about Puss by suggesting that his dismissiveness and contempt do not exclude sensitivity and feelings of hurt and pain.

The Thai women also function as a contrasting background against which Mary's white femininity appear as precious and in danger of violation. A key part of the drama regards Julia and Pyke's, as well as Robin's, worries about Mary's relationship with Puss and the suspicious environment of the brothel. In contrast to the representation of the Thai women as passively submissive and emotionally indifferent to their precarious situation, Mary is represented as vulnerable and at risk because of her love for the manipulative and erratic Puss.² The difference between Mary and the girls at the brothel is further emphasised when Puss pushes Mary to prostitute herself on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, as an act of solidarity with the Thai women. Whereas the commodification and exposure of the Thai girls are normalised in the series, Mary's ventures into street prostitution are represented as terrifying, violent, and traumatic. In the end, however, she regains her agency and dignity, leaves Puss, and reunites with her parents. In contrast, the Thai women never question or challenge Puss but follow him passively in silence and without signs of hesitation or emotion. The stereotypical depiction of the Thai women evokes a notion of vulnerability as passive victimhood and aestheticised spectacle. Their physical and material precarity render them no other narrative function than that of backdrop for the white characters.

EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE INTENDED PARENTS

After realising that the unidentified young woman is a surrogate, Robin starts searching for 'people who are neurotically fixated on having a baby', which, replies the physician at the IVF-clinic, 'sounds like everybody in here'. He describes the drive to reproduce as being like a 'vortex', and tells of a woman who died from her attempts to get pregnant, but died happy since she finally succeeded. In the series, the intended parents' desire to have children is portrayed as extremely emotionally charged, a drive that may drive you mad, as is the case of Felicity, who is introduced wandering in the middle of the street in a nightgown looking for her baby, which we learn is not yet born. Felicity has escaped from a psychiatric asylum where she ended up after twelve attempted pregnancies and eight miscarriages spanning several years, a process which also drained the couple's finances,

forcing them to sell their house and leaving them unable to pay for a lawyer. In desperation, the couple has impregnated three surrogates. 'We want to be sure, we can't take any more disappointments. She really doesn't need this. She would be okay if she could just have a baby. It would make her ok,' says Felicity's husband Mike. As mentioned earlier, Mike invokes the discourse on reproductive rights by stating that having a child is a human right. Crucially, however, in the series, the notion of reproductive rights is activated through an overemphasis on the emotional vulnerability of the intended parents and the suggestion that the desire to have a child is a force of nature, beyond the characters' control. This notion of the biological drive as a basis for rights claims exceeds notions of rational family planning and free choice that ground demands for birth control. The series manifests the decisive role that the articulation of vulnerability plays in justifying the practice of transnational commercial surrogacy. The emotional pain of the intended parents, including Robin's colleagues Miranda and Adrian, even justifies the fact that the arrangements are illegal, which does not lead to any consequences in the series (see figure 7.1).

As the intended parents of Padma's baby learn about her death, and the possibility of her being murdered, their only response is their need to see, acknowledge, and bury 'their child.' In the series, the intended parents, including Miranda and Adrian, claim such ownership to the babies inside the

Figure 7.1 Robin and Miranda in *Top of the Lake*.

surrogates' wombs. The different conceptions of kinship that are represented in the series illustrate how the nature/nurture divide is complicated by commercial surrogacy. In addition to the distinction between birthmother and adoptive mother, gestational surrogacy separates biological motherhood (the mother who gestates) from genetic motherhood (and in cases where the egg is sourced from an ova donor, social motherhood is added). In gestational surrogacy, genetics takes over the role of biology. For some couples turning to surrogacy rather than adoption, kinship as genetic relatedness (either through egg or sperm, or both) is a driving motive. Thus, the ways in which the intended parents in the series speak of 'their' children reproduces a dominant understanding of kinship made possible via surrogacy arrangements (Farrell Smith, 2005).

WHITE SAVIOURS

The representations of the Thai women and the white intended parents mobilise vulnerability in vastly different ways. A third narrative position is inhabited by the characters Robin and Puss, who both act as white saviours, if driven by different motifs. Puss's violent behaviour as well as his radical political ideas are inferred as originating in an abusive childhood. His class pathos and hatred are triggered by the encounter with Mary's upper-middle-class parents and her privileged upbringing. Puss not only teaches the women in the brothel about oppression and resistance, but also organises an escape of the surrogates back to Thailand. Through a recorded message left for the shocked intended parents as they discover the empty apartment where the surrogates lived, he formulates what could be described as a post-colonial critique of surrogacy:

For too long the West has exploited the poor and impoverished women of Asia. Girls as young as twelve years old are sold as virgins to gratify the appetite of the wealthy but what sort of life is that? Fucked to feed? Come on! And now you all want to grow your vile DNAs, your precious little babies, inside the slave wombs of enslaved women too poor to choose. But just one of these bundles of happiness gives enough money to support a whole village in the third world for years and years to come. Now the shoe is on the other foot. The tide has turned. Your babies have flown away and now it's your time to cry.

Here Puss connects sex work and surrogacy as two facets of the international division of reproductive labour and its racialised lines of stratification, while at the same time recognising the significance of the economic transaction involved in surrogacy. In another scene, he suggests that the

comfortable middle-class lives led by Mary's adoptive parents are made possible by cheap child labour in the Global South. Thus, he connects the material and physical vulnerability of the Thai women with a postcolonial history of poverty and exploitation that leads up to contemporary neo-liberal practices of unequal working and living conditions and disrupts notions of freedom and choice. Differently stated, he frames reproduction as a question of social justice and invokes the notion of reproductive justice. In Puss's view, flying the surrogates off to Thailand is presented as a way of empowering the powerless, of destabilising an unjust power relation. Puss not only provides a critical analysis of global inequality and gives proof of an awareness of class privileges but is also a proclaimed feminist. Yet, given his aggressive and manipulative personality, his political ideals in the end appear absurd and dishonest. He is shown to be provocatively sexist and even physically abusive towards both Robin and Mary. Using threats and physical abuse, he forces Mary to prostitute herself, and during a conversation on the beach suddenly bites Robin in the face, unprovoked. Thus, the postcolonial, reproductive justice-oriented critique articulated by Puss is easily dismissed as the intellectual meltdown of a bodily and emotionally detached white male.

In contrast to Puss's ideological analysis of power imbalances between the Global North and South, Robin's engagement with the pregnant Asian female victims, in both seasons of the series, turns deeply personal as the unfolding murder cases awaken her own trauma of sexualised violence, pregnancy, and giving up her child for adoption. Her empathetic desire to save these women can thus be read as a desire to potentially heal her own past injuries. Ultimately, though, Robin is driven by her desire to save her newly regained biological daughter Mary, who runs the risk of becoming the victim of similar assaults. Although the crime cases that both seasons revolve around regard the sexual exploitation and violation of Asian females, the trauma as well as the threat of sexual abuse are primarily attributed to and articulated by the white female lead and her daughter at risk. In the narrative logic of the series, the deadly patriarchal violence that the Asian characters are victims of can only be emotionally recognised from the point of view of the white character's experiences. The poster for the series shows Robin's naked back with cracks running across it, as though it were made of porcelain, clearly suggesting that the scars and vulnerability in the focus of *China Girl* are hers.

Moreover, in addition to the emotionally charged reproductive vulnerability articulated by the white intended parents, it is also Robin's experience of reproduction – of giving up her child at birth – that becomes a narrative focus, rather than the Asian females' experiences of their surrogate pregnancies. Although Robin and the surrogates are all birth mothers,

it is telling that while it has deep emotional consequences for Robin, we are told nothing about the Thai sex workers' feelings about the fetuses growing inside them. There are many parallels between commercial surrogacy in its transnational form and adoption in its modern transnational and transracial form – with children of colour from the Global South being adopted by white parents in the Global North. Scholars within the field of critical adoption studies have placed attention on the historical and political dimensions of transnational adoption. In this perspective, transnational adoption becomes a paradigmatic example of how 'imperialist processes "over there" and social relations "over here" intersect' (Eng, 2010: 95); that is, in transnational adoption, private family and kinship dynamics are conflated with public histories of race, class, and gender. In the series, however, it is Robin, the white female protagonist, who gives up her child for adoption, an emotional drama bolstered by Elizabeth Moss's roles in *Mad Men* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. These narratives also place white women's experience of reproduction at centre stage and omit the historical and present role of race in adoption and surrogacy, hence whitewashing these experiences (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gibney and Askeland, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Top of the Lake: China Girl is a multilayered narrative addressing complex issues of sexualised and racialised power relations and vulnerabilities. In our reading, we have demonstrated how the series sets vulnerability in motion in terms of stereotypical and fetishising images of Asian femininity as exploitable and disposable, as well as in terms of an intense emotional drama about white women's experiences of sexual violence, reproduction, and motherhood. The affective economy of the series, we argue, privileges and attaches great value to white femininity as precious, emotionally fragile, and at risk of abuse – against the flat backdrop of passive and emotionally indifferent Asian sex workers. Only the white mothers are allowed to feel, whereas the feelings, thoughts, and desires of the surrogate mothers are not part of the story. Vulnerability, we argue, becomes a vehicle by which experiences of trauma and hurt in regard to sexual violence as well as reproduction are whitewashed in the series. Rather than focusing on the Thai women's material and physical vulnerability as illegally contracted surrogates exposed to the risk of being murdered, the series explores in depth the psychological injuries suffered by Robin having given up her child for adoption, as well as by the intended parents going mad from longing for children. Most clearly, we conclude, the series illuminates the crucial role of vulnerability in the ongoing debate about transnational commercial surrogacy and its conflicting

discourses of reproductive rights and reproductive justice. It demonstrates how an idea of extreme emotional vulnerability of white intended parents can powerfully override concerns for the material and physical precarity of surrogates in the Global South.

NOTES

- 1 'China Girl' is also the title of a David Bowie hit single from 1983, which deals with stereotypes of East Asian women and racism.
- 2 Manipulative men are a recurrent theme in Campion's work: Isabel Archer's husband Gilbert in *Portrait of a Lady* (1996) and Ada's lover Baines in *The Piano* (1996) are other examples.

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