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Cracks Beneath the Surface: Deconstructing the Myth of the Perfect Suburban Family in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

ABSTRACT
Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere (2017)* dismantles the idealized image of the suburban family, exposing the inequalities concealed by middle-class privilege. Set in the planned community of Shaker Heights, the novel depicts the unraveling of the seemingly perfect Richardson family following their encounter with Mia Warren, an unconventional single mother. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital, this paper analyzes suburban conformity as a marker of moral legitimacy and social power. In dialogue with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, it further examines how family ideals function as fragile social constructs. Ultimately, the article argues that Ng exposes the myth of the "perfect" nuclear family as a mechanism that reproduces exclusion and systemic inequality in contemporary American culture.

KEYWORDS
suburban family; suburbs; performativity; habitus; cultural capital

1. Introduction

In her 2017 novel *Little Fires Everywhere*, American author Celeste Ng offers more than a compelling tale of domestic upheaval – she crafts a sharp sociological critique of suburban America, unmasking the fragile myth of the perfect family. Set against the backdrop of Shaker Heights, Ohio, a community meticulously designed to embody order and progress, in the year 1997, the novel reveals how such carefully engineered environments conceal deep-rooted inequalities and simmering discontent. As the Richardson family's pristine existence is upended by the arrival of Mia Warren – a nomadic artist and single mother of teenage daughter Pearl, who rents and apartment belonging to the Richardsons and eventually works as a domestic aide for them – the illusion of stability and moral superiority begins to fracture. The Richardsons, whose privilege has long gone unexamined, are forced to confront the limits of their worldview, revealing, in Timotheus Vermeulen's (2014) words, "the pretty white picket fence [that] secrets a graveyard" and a suburb (p. 2). When their home ultimately burns to the ground,

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and "everyone within half a mile could see the smoke rising" (Ng, 2017, p. 1), it becomes clear that the destruction is more than physical; it is the collapse of an entire constructed identity.

Through its portrayal of the Richardson family and the disruptive presence of Mia Warren, Ng's novel exposes how suburban ideals of perfection are not just personal choices but performances shaped by systemic forces of privilege, cultural capital, and rigid social norms – forces that ultimately render true social mobility and authenticity almost impossible.

The Richardsons' interactions with Mia and Pearl reveal how deeply their *habitus* – the ingrained dispositions shaped by their privileged upbringing – limits their ability to understand or empathize with those outside their social field. As Pierre Bourdieu (2020) argues, the social world is "a space of potential forces, an order of coexistence" that defines individuals by their location within it, and thus their behavior becomes bound by invisible structures (p. 213). Shaker Heights itself functions as such a field, reinforcing specific patterns of thought and exclusion.

The novel also demonstrates how cultural capital becomes a weapon of subtle exclusion. Mia's lack of wealth, stable residence, and conformity to local norms positions her outside the accepted order of Shaker Heights, echoing Bourdieu's (2020) assertion that fields act through "forces of exclusion that render entry difficult" (p. 251). Pearl's desire to fit in and her attraction to the privileges the Richardsons enjoy show how social structures reproduce themselves through unspoken rules.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a crucial lens to understand the fragility of suburban identity. The Richardson family's devotion to their image – of fairness, success, and liberal tolerance – is revealed to be an ongoing, fragile performance. Their conformity masks repressed desires, hypocrisies, and prejudices, a performance that collapses dramatically along with their house, resulting in "little fires everywhere" with "multiple points of origin" and the "possible use of accelerant" (Ng, 2017, p. 7).

Moreover, Ng's portrayal of Shaker Heights mirrors broader cultural critiques of suburban life. As claimed by urbanist Stephen Rowley, the suburb is indeed not only an idyllic place but a "highly loaded cultural signifier" of dysfunction, passive conformity, and hidden transgressions (Rowley, 2015, p. 206). Ng taps into these semiotic connotations, suggesting that the suburb is less a real place than a symbol of a society obsessed with appearances at the expense of truth.

Finally, the recurring motif of 'little fires' throughout the novel functions as both a literal and symbolic representation of systemic tensions. The slow build-up of resentment, repression, and privilege ultimately ignites, making destruction not an accident, but an inevitability rooted deep within the structures of suburban life itself.

Thus, by examining *Little Fires Everywhere* through the intertwined frameworks of Bourdieu's theory of social forces and Butler's theory of performativity, this paper will explain how Ng exposes the fragile performances demanded by suburban life, the invisible structures that sustain privilege, and the slow-burning tensions that ultimately destroy the illusions of safety and success, and the myths of meritocracy and social mobility within the contemporary American suburban culture.

2. Shaker Heights: the quintessential suburb

From its foundation, Shaker Heights embodied the quintessential American suburban ideal[1] – a carefully designed utopia where order, predictability, and perfection were meticulously planned and enforced. As argued by Bourdieu (2020), societies are shaped by the persistent interplay of individuals within structured spaces, where long-term interactions generate a collective *esprit de corps* and social coherence (p. 11). Shaker Heights exemplifies this dynamic: it is a "finite and closed" system engineered to foster stability, predictability, and conformity (Bourdieu, 2021, pp. 8–9; p. 181). In the novel, Ng (2017) describes Shaker Heights as a community steeped in rules, rituals, and expectations, where "everything could and should be planned out" to avoid "the unseemly, the unpleasant, and the disastrous" (p. 12). The town's motto, "[m]ost communities just happen; the best are planned", reflects a belief in the absolute manageability of life – a belief that echoes Bourdieu's notion that social fields, while structured by invisible forces, are designed to produce a maximum of synchronized and orchestrated practices (p. 182).

The suburb's obsession with meticulous planning extended beyond physical design into the regulation of social life, fostering a homogenized community identity rooted in collective ideals of success, safety, and propriety. As Ng (2017) illustrates, Shaker Heights residents maintained strict codes of conduct even for activities as benign as trick-or-treating, with sirens marking the official start and end times (p. 59). This conformity, however, masked deeper social tensions. Historically, American suburbs promised an Arcadian refuge (Knox, 2008, p. 13), yet as historians like Stephanie Coontz (1992) and Paul Knox (2008) note, the suburban dream often concealed domestic violence, consumerist isolation, and existential boredom (Coontz, 1992, p. 35; Knox, 2008, p. 36). Shaker Heights is no exception. Despite its liberal self-image – symbolized by initiatives to

[1] According to Lewis Mumford (1961), the ideal American suburb constituted a sort of "escape" from the city and its drama, a "segregated community" for the elite. Mumford describes these places as sites of conformity: houses barely distinguishable from one another, put at a uniform distance from each other, inhabited by people belonging to the same social class and with the same taste and cultural references (pp. 486–493).

encourage integration after national civil rights upheavals (Ng, 2017, p. 159) – the community's commitment to order and perfection often veiled latent racial and class anxieties.

According to Bourdieu (2020), the field of forces that constitutes any social space is invisible but exerts a profound influence on behavior, molding dispositions that match the demands of the structure (pp. 13, 73). In Shaker Heights, the space itself was selected for those who could internalize its expectations: a "structure of feeling" developed, binding residents to shared symbols of affluence, stability, and control (Knox, 2008, p. 34). The Richardson family, as product of this environment, view their lives through the lens of this suburban ideology, believing themselves paragons of virtue and success. Yet as Ng (2017) subtly reveals, the town's aesthetic perfection – flourishing gardens, orderly neighborhoods, and collective pride in public institutions – only thinly conceals the cracks formed by suppressed desires, hidden inequalities, and repressed difference (pp. 156–157).

Shaker Heights, much like the suburbs described by Lewis Mumford (1961), becomes an "asylum for the preservation of illusion" (p. 494): a place where residents retreat from the complexities and discomforts of reality into a self-sustaining fantasy of stability and moral superiority. Beneath the surface order, Ng shows, lies a volatile tension – an accumulation of small, invisible pressures that, like the titular "little fires", can ignite at multiple points, challenging the community's cherished self-image and exposing the fragility of its ideal. This obsessive commitment to order and perfection did not just shape the town's landscape; it molded its residents, too. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Richardson family, who embody the ideals, contradictions, and blind spots of Shaker Heights itself.

3. The Richardsons: A habitus of privilege

The Richardson family exemplifies the kind of privilege that feels so natural it goes unnoticed, embodying what Bourdieu (2020) describes as *habitus* – a system of deeply ingrained dispositions shaped by social conditions, which operates beneath conscious awareness (pp. 7, 14). Like "fish swimming in water", the Richardsons live within structures they did not create but that seem perfectly suited to them, adapting so seamlessly to their environment that their success appears effortless and self-evident (2020, pp. 14, 66). As residents of Shaker Heights, they have been "fashioned" by their surroundings and move through life with a sense of ease and entitlement that comes from a complete alignment between their socialized selves and the world they inhabit (Ng, 2017, pp. 66, 72).

Bill Richardson, a defense attorney, and his wife Elena, a journalist for the *Sun Press*, reflect this adaptation not only through their professions but through their deep investment in the town's ideals (p. 11). Mrs. Richardson's upbringing – rooted in annual charitable donations and community events – instilled in her

a moral framework centered on "doing good", a framework that masks a more profound, unexamined comfort with the status quo (p. 12). Their adolescent children – Lexie, Trip, Moody, and Izzy – move through their privileged lives with an unconscious confidence: ordering without hesitation, lounging without self-consciousness (p. 36), exhibiting what Bourdieu (2020) would call a "feel for the game", (p. 80) instinctively matching the expectations of their social field without needing to question them. Their cultural capital is not just embodied but also institutionalized, seen in their educational success and social networks – the kind of capital transmitted invisibly through family life, in everyday interactions that pass down not just knowledge but implicit codes of behavior and belonging (Bourdieu 2021, pp. 161–165).

Pearl Warren, an outsider to this world, befriends almost immediately Moody, and she is introduced to the Richardsons' house where she notices the heavy furniture, the framed photographs, the curio cabinets—symbols of a deeply rooted stability and permanence that she finds both alien and alluring (Ng, 2017, p. 37). This immersion in material and cultural wealth produces a kind of inevitability: to live among such abundance is to be anchored, to have no need to question one's place. Yet beneath the surface of this carefully maintained order lies rigidity and an intolerance for disruption. Izzy, the family's radical spirit and eventually the arsonist of her own house, resists the smooth functioning of this system, refusing to dance when instructed, refusing to obey without question (Ng, 2017, pp. 40–41) – revealing what Bourdieu (2021, p. 271) calls the "discipline" of immediate, mechanical obedience that the Richardson household demands.

In their perfectly manicured neighborhood where "every lawn had a tree and the streets curved so that no one went too fast" (Ng, 2017, p. 323), the Richardsons embody the dream of suburban perfection, a dream that demands conformity and suppresses difference. Mrs. Richardson, a "creature of habit", represents the culmination of this social conditioning, maintaining appearances with such consistency that her routines are entirely predictable (p. 322). Their habitus, formed at the intersection of material wealth, cultural privilege, and social sanction, gives the Richardsons their seamless authority in Shaker Heights, while at the same time blinding them to the ways their security and superiority are constructed – and exclusionary (Bourdieu, 2020, pp. 124, 202, 225; 2021, p. 195).

Even in moments of confrontation – such as when Mr. Richardson defends a couple of friends struggling in court to obtain the custody of an Asian child whose mother had abandoned and then, regretting her choice, had come back to claim her – the family's reflex is to maintain the boundary that preserves their order rather than question the deeper inequalities it rests upon (Ng, 2017, p. 267). Their world, like the mechanisms Bourdieu (2020) describes, feels perfectly suited to their touch – not because of any inherent superiority, but because both they and their environment have been shaped by the same forces (p. 72).

Thus, the Richardson family's polished existence is less a reflection of innate virtue than a continuous, ritualized performance of the ideals they have inherited, rehearsed, and embodied over time. Their carefully maintained image of familial success – rooted in discipline, order, and propriety – reveals not a static truth about who they are, but an ongoing enactment of social norms that must be constantly reiterated to sustain their appearance of legitimacy. In this way, the Richardsons exemplify how, as Judith Butler argues, identity – whether individual or familial – is not simply *being* but *doing*: a performative repetition of culturally sanctioned scripts that create the illusion of naturalness, as it will be explored in the next section.

4. The performativity of family ideals

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a powerful lens through which to analyze the construction of family identity. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, such ideals of domestic perfection are exposed as carefully repeated performances rather than inherent truths. Butler (1999) asserts that "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes"; rather, it is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 33). This concept can be translated into the realm of family ideals and roles, which, in the case of the Richardson family, is not a natural formation but a performance that is both compelled by and complicit in upholding normative ideals. As Butler (1993) writes, these acts are sustained "through reiteration", producing effects by simulating what they repeat (pp. 20, 94). In the Richardson household, these norms are ritualized and internalized, particularly by Elena, who "crafted the pleasant, wholesome stories her editor demanded" while tending to her family with the controlled precision of someone passing "an eternal flame" – a metaphor for domestic virtue made safe through discipline (Ng, 2017, pp. 108, 161).

Such performances are fraught with anxiety, though. Butler (2004) emphasizes that the "viability of our own personhood is fundamentally dependent on social norms", norms that differentiate the human based on "race, morphology, recognizability" (p. 2). Elena's maternal ideal is a response to inherited pressures: her mother had scorned women who stayed home, demanding that Elena "have it all", framing deviation as wasted potential (Ng, 2017, p. 108). This reveals how performativity is not simply an act of will, but a response to being "gone by norms", where the "I" that persists does so only by critically negotiating the forces that shape it (Butler, 2004, p. 3). In this framework, even rebellion – such as Izzy's – becomes legible as resistance to the "compulsory performances" of heteronormative, middle-class femininity, which Butler (1993) argues are "haunted by their own inefficacy" and must be anxiously repeated to assert their legitimacy (p. 257).

The result is a dynamic in which family identity is never secure, but always vulnerable to reinterpretation. Izzy, framed as the disruptive daughter, becomes

the uncontainable element of the family performance: "that child who she thought had been her opposite but who had… inherited that spark her mother had long ago tamped down" (Ng, 2017, p. 336). Her rebellion reveals the theatricality of the entire domestic structure, what Butler (1993) might describe as the moment when "the ideal splits off from its appropriation" and the performance's "artifice" becomes visible (p. 129).

The family ideal, far from being timeless or universal, is historically and culturally constructed. As historians Joseph Hawes and Elizabeth Nybakken (1991) argue, "the history of the American family is a story of the conflict between the 'family ideal' in American society and the core value of individualism" (p. 8). Education and gender studies scholar Edgar Z. Friedenberg (1959) extends this tension into adolescence, which he describes as "a conflict… between the individual and society" (p. 9), where the young person must become "a person in his own right" but only "on the culture's terms" (p. 12). This paradox – of needing to differentiate oneself through conformity – is precisely the terrain of performativity, which Butler (1993) insists is "neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation" but rather a constrained, reiterative process shaped by discourse, exclusion, and anxiety (p. 95; Butler, 2004, p. 1). The arrival of Mia and Pearl functions as a disruption of this cycle: they neither obey nor reinforce the same norms. Their presence forces the Richardsons to confront the limits and contradictions of their idealized roles, and ultimately, the performative nature of the "American family" itself.

5. Mia and Pearl: challenging the status quo

The arrival of Mia Warren and her daughter Pearl disrupts the seemingly flawless social order of Shaker Heights, where appearances are paramount and deviation from the norm is subtly, yet powerfully, discouraged. The two are a blatant deviation to the norm: as it is discovered later in the novel, not only is Mia a single mother, but Pearl is the product of an agreement between her and a wealthy couple, the Ryans, who paid her to carry a child and relinquish it to them. Mia had eventually decided to keep the child to herself, lying about the fate of the child and telling the Ryans she had miscarried. Moreover, the nomadic existence of Mia and Pearl is in obvious contrast with the suburban logic of Shaker Heights. As Bourdieu (2020) explains, "the incorporated structures of the habitus generate practices that can adapt to the objective structures of the social world without being the product of an explicit intention to adapt" (p. 64) a dynamic that defines the Richardsons' way of life. Their "habitus of necessity" (p. 125) fosters compliance and order, but also passively resists change. Mia and Pearl bring with them a different kind of habitus – one shaped by artistic exploration, economic precarity, and social marginality. As Bourdieu (2020) puts it, "when you don't have the right habitus for your object, you fail" (p. 31) and in the rigid field of Shaker Heights, Mia and

Pearl are initially misfits, threatening the illusion – the shared belief in the rules of the game – that binds the town together (p. 84).

Mia, described as "a woman who took an almost perverse pleasure in flouting the normal order" (Ng, 2017, p. 138), unsettles the values that define the community. While Mrs. Richardson dismisses her as "some kind of artist" (p. 11), her art – though once sold for only a few dollars (p. 27) – eventually supports the survival of herself and her child and becomes a mode of resistance. Her daughter Pearl, "a quiet fifteen-year-old with a long dark braid" (p. 8), internalizes this ethos of transience and resilience, her awareness of money and instability (p. 98) shaping her sensitivity and curiosity. In contrast to the Richardsons' polished suburban lifestyle, Pearl remarks, she and her mother "never had a house of [their] own before" (p. 19), a reminder of the invisible instability behind her calm demeanor.

Bourdieu (2020, p. 74) notes that "people who import unorthodox and discordant dispositions into a soft position have a good chance of being able to mould the position to suit their dispositions", and this dynamic plays out as Mia and Pearl begin to exert influence in their new environment. For Mia, who once faced skepticism from her own lower-middle-class parents – her mother calling her photographs "a waste of money" (p. 190) and her parents who had "practicality… baked into their bones" (p. 197) –art becomes a form of survival and subversion. Bourdieu (2021, p. 170) emphasizes that incorporated capital functions as a sort of nature, and in Mia's case, her artistry becomes her essence, her way of being in the world. Unlike the Richardsons, whose cultural capital is validated through institutional pathways, Mia's is intensely personal, unrecognized by the dominant social order but no less powerful.

The class distinction between the two families becomes particularly stark in moments like that in which Pearl compares the Richardsons' kitchen and the way their children are dressed with her modest life on Winslow Road, filled with salvaged furniture and shared spaces (p. 97). Moody's shock at their living conditions – "he tried to imagine sharing a room… could people really be so poor?" (p. 19) –demonstrates how deeply ingrained these differences are. Bourdieu (2021, p. 128) explains how "social agents placed in a given social situation will tend to adapt their aspirations…to the possibilities objectively written into these conditions", yet both Mia and Pearl challenge this determinism. Their creative aspirations reject the logic of institutional validation – what Bourdieu (p. 241) calls "institutionalized capital", like educational qualifications – and instead insist on worth that is lived, not conferred.

For Mia, art is inseparable from identity. As Bourdieu (2021, pp. 166–167) notes, "culture… is coextensive with its bearer", and this makes artists particularly vulnerable. Even her decision to keep Pearl can be seen as a resistance to commodifying her body – "her womb was not an apartment for rent" (p. 215) – and her eventual assertion of her own motherhood against legal and economic claims

(p. 186) reflect her refusal to detach identity from action. Even her discovery of photography at age eleven (p. 188) was a reclamation of self in a world that dismissed such pursuits. For the Richardsons, who "lacked for nothing but were never spoiled" (p. 195), her choices are unfathomable. Their world is defined by rules – about property, appearances, and social order – while Mia and Pearl inhabit a more precarious but flexible space.

Ultimately, as Bourdieu (2021, p. 75) writes, "the person who manages to displace the position shakes up the whole space", and this is precisely what Mia and Pearl do. Their presence calls into question the illusion of neutrality in the norms of Shaker Heights. While the Richardsons believe they've earned their place through merit and discipline, Mia and Pearl reveal how much of that security is the result of inherited privilege and unacknowledged exclusions. In choosing to live differently, Mia and Pearl force Shaker Heights – and the reader – to confront the limits of conformity, the costs of comfort, and the quiet power of dissent.

6. Conclusion

The novel opens with the fire that destroys the house of the Richardsons, which could be read as a metaphor of the disintegration of seemingly stable social structures when they are confronted with lives and values that refuse to conform. This plot choice reveals how privilege and habitus shape not only opportunity but the very sense of what is imaginable or permissible. As Bourdieu (2021, p. 6) observes, "there are within each one of us potentials that will never materialize because they will never find the social conditions of their implementation – that is, a field in which they could be implemented". For Mia and Pearl, and for others who exist outside the dominant structures of power in Shaker Heights, these fields are narrow or entirely absent. Their potential, creativity, and independence challenge the fixed norms that preserve social inequality under the guise of order and meritocracy.

At the heart of the novel lies a critique of the suburban consumer logic that defines worth through ownership, stability, and appearances – what Jean Baudrillard (1998, p. 65) identifies as a culture where "society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to destroy them". This consumption extends not just to material goods but to people, relationships, and even ideals. The Richardson family's identity is maintained by curating a particular image of success and goodness, which in turn relies on the erasure or containment of that which threatens it – Mia, and even Izzy. Like the objects Baudrillard describes, the value the Richardsons place on their way of life is intensified through its eventual unraveling. A complementary plot choice had already been operated in another novel about the suburbs and its discontents published in 1999: *Music for Torching* by A. M. Homes. Paul and Elaine, another unhappy and bored suburban couple,

burned their house down on a whim at the beginning of the novel. Thus it is inevitable to apply Baudrillard's concept also to this other novel and claim that, when it comes to the American suburbs and their families, the social and familial order must be scorched before it can be reimagined.

In this sense, Ng's novel is not simply a story of loss but of radical possibility. "Sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over", Mia tells Izzy, "[a]fter the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow. People are like that, too" (Ng, 2017, p. 324). This echoes Bourdieu's (2020) argument that positions and habitus are not immutable – when disrupted, they can shake "the whole space" (p. 75). In the ashes of the Richardson home and their illusion of control, a new awareness begins to take root – not just in Izzy, who flees after the arson of her house and decides to reinvent herself, but in those left behind to confront what was lost and why.

Little Fires Everywhere leaves readers with more than a critique – it offers a call to action. It challenges them to examine the conditions that suppress individual potential and to recognize the social scripts they unconsciously follow. It suggests that what may appear as rebellion, instability, or failure might actually be the necessary destruction through which more equitable ways of being can emerge. Only by acknowledging the structures that limit them – and sometimes setting them on fire – can they begin to imagine a more inclusive and just society.

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