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## "Little Fires Everywhere"

Throughout her novel *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng explores the effects that power structures can have on society. Specifically, she uses the character of Mrs. Peters, a high school music teacher. Despite Mrs. Peters lack of mention throughout the novel, she plays a particularly important role. Her feelings of entitlement mirror that of the Richardsons and the McCulloughs, but unlike those two families, Mrs. Peters is not able to get what she wants. Her character serves to illuminate the incredible costs that come with entitlement. Thus, Ng's depiction of Mrs. Peters' flawed sense of superiority reveals the dangers of perpetuating arbitrary systems of power. This power, often stemming from institutions, comes at the expense of those under the control of those very systems. Although Mrs. Peters serves as an employee of the educational institution, she is still granted authority over the one group who is considered inferior to her: the students. However, Mrs. Peters does not use this power ethically. Rather, she abuses her power to make others feel weak, therefore, solidifying her dominance over others. Her students all view her as "bitingly sarcastic, especially to the ones who were 'pigmentally blessed'" (76). To that end, when Deja makes a mistake while playing the violin, Mrs. Peters condescendingly asks Deja, "Did you not understand me? Do you need me to speak Ebonics?" (76). Mrs. Peters derogatory questions are clearly an aspersion at Deja by targeting her insecurities about her ethnicity. In asking Deja if she would understand how to play the violin correctly if Mrs. Peters spoke to Deja in "Ebonics," referring to a black way of speaking, she categorizes Deja as a subordinate outsider. Whites typically denounce "ebonics," as a slangy, uneducated way of speaking.

Therefore, Mrs. Peters tries to use her white superiority to her advantage in order to disparage Deja as a way to elevate her own power. The power Mrs. Peters gains from being white is an arbitrary power; there is no scientific basis for race since race is merely a made-up label. White superiority is a man-made idea, created to give whites the same sense of power that Mr. Peters currently craves. Considering that Mrs. Peters is hungover and therefore has lost some control over herself to alcohol, Mrs. Peters wants to regain her sense of power by exerting her dominance over her students which, in this case, she did by humiliating one girl with her prejudiced commentary. These remarks prove that Mrs. Peters is clearly not attempting to create a class built on the foundations of mutual respect. Instead, she wants to maximize the little control she has as a teacher by instilling fear in her students so they will give her their complete obedience. The cruel way that Mrs. Peters treats her students enrages Izzy, who ends up reaching her "breaking" point when Mrs. Peters singles out Deja. All of the pent-up anger filling Izzy manifests as Izzy's literal "breaking" of Mrs. Peters' bow. Since something inside Izzy snapped, she wanted to inflict the same sentiment on Mrs. Peters, and she felt the best way to do this was by "breaking" Mrs. Peters' bow. Thus, she also "broke" the power dynamic between students and teachers by blatantly disrespecting Mrs. Peters. However, it is not enough for Izzy to just punish Mrs. Peters in this way. Izzy wants to stand up to "every adult who'd ever cudgelled a student with arbitrary, unearned power" (82). Inspired by Mia to take matters into her own hands, Izzy wants to get revenge and essentially fight fire with fire, by "cudgel[ing] the adults who 'cudgelled' her. Izzy wants to fight against what she perceives as the injustices of those who have 'unearned' power which they received arbitrarily by being apart of an institution. Since school is a microcosm of institutions that control society, then Mrs. Peters represents a type of institutional control. Izzy is rebelling against all institutions that

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enforce constricting rules and order on the people. This connects back to the novel's titular idea of setting "little fires everywhere" to stand up against the strict rules of society. Hence, Mrs. Peters importance in the novel comes from giving Izzy the motivation to stand up against the systems that are the bedrock of society, which is the overarching message of the novel. To fight against these arbitrary systems of power, Izzy puts toothpicks in all the locks so teachers cannot get inside their classrooms. Essentially, she takes away the teacher's control of their own rooms, specifically hurting Mrs. Peters. Since Mrs. Peters is so accustomed to being the one with the power over others, she is hurled into a state of anger when this power is inevitably stripped from her. Having grown used to this power, Mrs. Peters has become entitled to it. For example, when none of the teachers are able to get into their classrooms, the janitor must go around to fix all of the locks. As Mrs. Peters waits for the janitor, her agitation grows. She notes that, at this rate, "her [door] would be the last to be unjammed... she ask[s] Mr. Wrigley several times if he couldn't go faster, if he could take a moment and open her door first" (84).

This quotation reveals the false sense of superiority that Mrs. Peters feels. She wants "her door" to be "first," implying that she believes she should get priority over the other teachers as if she were somehow above her colleagues. When the janitor refuses her request, the reader sees how the power balance between people is not set in stone. In the janitor's refusal, he becomes the person in a position of power, despite normally being one of the lowest on the totem pole. He now holds this power over Mrs. Peters since he is the only person who can offer her what she needs. This issue of shifting power balances proves prevalent throughout the novel. In particular, a very comparable situation occurs at the abortion clinic. Mrs. Richardson, used to getting what she wants, demands information from her old friend Elizabeth who works at the clinic, but Liz refuses to give it up. Similar to how Mrs. Peters reacts when the janitor refuses to open her door, Mrs. Richardson grows upset when Liz does not give her the information she feels entitled to have. In these parallel situations, both Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. Peters discern the other party's noncompliance as a direct injustice against them, although they are the ones who are actually being unjust. However, unlike the incident at the school, Mrs. Richardson is ultimately able to get what she wants. She only temporarily loses her authority whereas as Mrs. Peters suffers a humiliating blow. This difference causes the reader to wonder why Mrs. Richardson is privileged enough to maintain her authority and get what she wants, while Mrs. Peters does not receive the same sentiment.

Despite Mrs. Peters being an authoritative figure at a school, she is so easily dismantled by the juvenile antics of an uppity teenage girl. In contrast, Elizabeth is the one backed by a physical institution, but somehow Mrs. Richardson can plow right through it and assert her dominance without getting in any sort of trouble for breaking the law. This invisible authority of Mrs. Richardson stems from a type of invisible power structure that is cast over the entire novel: the authority of the white, privileged upper class. Although Mrs. Peters is white, she is regulated out of this privileged since she is an employee of the school which casts her as a lower rank. The different aftermaths of both women's situations serve to demonstrate that power is an arbitrary quality. The different ensuing dynamics between Mrs. Richardson and Elizabeth compared to Mrs. Peters and the janitor make Mrs. Peters an especially compelling character. Through the character of Mrs. Peters, Ng demonstrates that those who are valued in society are benefitting from their privilege of an arbitrary power. Overall, Ng encourages the reader to consider the ways people obtained power and with that, challenge the validity of others' power if necessary. In modern society, the thirst for power can drive people to go to the extremes. For example, oftentimes, in political elections, candidates opt to manipulate the public to gain authority. Once they have this authority, they tend to use it corruptly to ensure they stay in power. Hence, a

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failure to take action against the injustices one sees can unleash devastating consequences.

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