

A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams's *Queenie* (2019): Challenging Discourses of Race and Gender in the Chick-Lit Genre

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Abstract: Candice Carty-Williams's best-selling debut novel *Queenie* (2019) has been marketed and reviewed as the story of a Black Bridget Jones. This comparison has been challenged by readers and critics alike, even though it was drawn by Carty-Williams herself. The fact that Carty-Williams chose a comparison to a marketing label that is still frequently belittled and often ignored altogether by critics to preclude another labelling-practice based on her ethnicity speaks volumes not only about the whiteness of the British book industry, but also the lasting popular appeal of chick lit, whose death has been proclaimed numerous times since the days of Bridget Jones. This article argues that Carty-Williams's novel has adapted the chick-lit formula that became famous with Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), assimilated some genre conventions, and even openly hints at its intertext in places. However, *Queenie* has innovatively politicised this formula by subverting the neoliberal and postfeminist elements that dominated the narratives of many white chick-lit texts of the 1990s and early 2000s through an overt focus on racism in its many forms, but foremostly in the fields of dating and relationships. Through its exploration of the intersections of race, class, and gender, *Queenie* is an important and timely contribution to the tradition of Black female writing in Britain, as well as to the chick-lit genre.

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1. Introduction: Black British Chick Lit?

Candice Carty-Williams's best-selling debut novel *Queenie* (2019) has been marketed and reviewed as the story of a Black Bridget Jones. This comparison has been challenged by readers and critics alike. Afua Hirsch, for instance, pointed out that the book "tells a far deeper story than the one it has been compared to" (n.pag). In an interview, Carty-Williams revealed that she herself chose the tagline. Having worked in the publishing sector and being well-aware of the underrepresentation of BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) authors, the logics of marketing, and the fight for readers' attention in a competitive market segment, Carty-Williams explained: "[I]t was going to be a hard sell because there hadn't been any books like it. *Bridget Jones* is the closest. Also, most fiction by black authors gets pigeonholed into literary fiction. I wanted *Queenie* to be widely read and understood" (in Sethi, n.pag.). The claim that "there hadn't been any books like it" seems difficult to justify, given the breadth of the chick-lit genre and the number of publications from chick-lit writers of colour, both internationally but also in the British context.[1] Carty-Williams's comparison is perhaps best understood as a marketing ploy rather than a comment on her novel's similarity to *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). However, the fact that Carty-Williams chose a reference to a marketing label that is frequently belittled or ignored by critics to preclude another labelling practice based on her ethnicity speaks volumes not only about the whiteness of the book industry, but also the lasting popular appeal of chick lit, whose death has been proclaimed numerous times since the days of Bridget Jones. In another interview, Carty-Williams qualified the comparability: "Well, everyone has made the comparison to a black Bridget Jones. That's how I thought of her in the beginning, too. But this book is also naturally political just because of who *Queenie* is. She's not Bridget Jones. She could never be" (in Keegan, n.pag.).

While the "Black Bridget Jones" label is problematic, it has at least drawn public attention to the politics of representation of the book market in general and of the genre of chick lit more specifically. It has been widely established that chick lit has a problem with representation, its most successful titles focussing largely on white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied and able-minded heroines. This is partly why chick lit can be considered a "residual cultural element", meaning it is "at some distance from the effective dominant culture", or, simply put, no longer as omnipresent in popular culture as it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Williams 123). However, chick-lit scholarship has not only shown that the chick-lit formula can be adapted to and evolve in different cultural contexts, but also that chick lit as a cultural phenomenon remains an eminent point of reference and an inspiration for new and more diverse formats of (post)feminist literature and media culture (Mißler 2). Carty-Williams's novel is exemplary of this development. It has adapted the formula that became famous with Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, assimilated some generic conventions, especially in terms of its paratexts and form, and even openly hints at its intertext in places. More importantly, however, *Queenie* has innovatively politicised the chick-lit formula by rewriting and subverting the neoliberal and postfeminist elements that dominated the narratives of many white chick-lit texts of the 1990s and 2000s. Its overt focus on the many forms of sexism, racism, and the intersections thereof, foremostly in the field of dating and relationships, does not only challenge the whiteness of the genre per se, but also shows that discourses of romance, which are often thought to represent a

universal experience within our Western societies, are culturally inflected and laden with racialised—if not racist—stereotypes. Through its exploration of intersectionality, *Queenie* is an important and timely contribution to both, the tradition of Black female writing in Britain, as well as to the chick-lit genre.[2]

2. Chick Lit and Representation: Situating *Queenie* Within the Chick-Lit Discourse

Despite the fact that chick lit is a global phenomenon and can be considered a genre of world literature due to its international audiences and its many permutations in different national settings, it is often considered a white genre, due to its most famous—or rather most visible—heroines. However, as many scholars have shown, what is sometimes called “ethnic” chick lit[3] can be considered a genre in its own right, with its own genealogies, rather than a mere subcategory that has uncritically adopted a white formula. Chick lit’s genealogy is indeed complex. Many related genres, such as the novel of manners, the confessional novel, and the Bildungsroman, have been established as forerunners and defining moments in the emergence of chick lit as a genre. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and *Sex and the City* (1997) are usually cited as ur-texts, but the genre’s literary heritage stretches back to Jane Austen and other 19th and early 20th-century women writers such as, for example, Edith Wharton. However, alternative genealogies, specifically for African-American and for Indian chick lit have also been traced (Hurt 2019 and Ponzanesi 2014), so that the positioning of Fielding’s and Bushnell’s novels at the centre of the genre is indeed questionable, especially given that some by now canonical chick-lit texts predate these novels—most notably, for example, Terry Macmillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* (1992). Chick-lit scholarship has looked at African American chick lit (Guerrero 2006) and South-Asian American chick lit (Butler and Desai 2008), postcolonial chick lit in general (Ponzanesi 2014), chica lit (Hedrick 2015), chick lit by authors of colour as a negotiation of ethnicity and nationality (Hurt 2019) and African chick lit (Folie 2020). These studies have analysed how writers of colour such as Kavita Daswani, Kim Wong Keltner, Terry Macmillan, Alisa Valdes, Cynthia Jele, and many more, have expanded the political dimensions of the single-girl(s)-in-the-city formula popularized by white chick-lit heroines such as Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw. An alignment of Carty-Williams’ work with *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is thus only one way of framing this text—it should also be considered within the tradition of chick-lit written by writers of colour, and as a successful continuation of the political project their work represents.

As Ponzanesi states, chick lit as part of popular culture “participates in forming and providing insights into national and global citizenship” (190), and chick lit by writers of colour and non-Western authors makes these processes of identity formation even clearer by, for example, featuring heroines who have to negotiate their status in society on a daily basis. These chick-lit texts fulfil important functions for writers and readers from ethnic minority backgrounds, most notably as far as identity, assimilation, and belonging are concerned, because they tackle issues of race, religion, migration, and citizenship along with gender issues. Amy Burge has argued that these texts should be integrated into the canon of migration literature, from which they are often omitted simply due to their status

as genre fiction, despite the fact that they offer valuable insights into the “intersection of migration and intimate relationships between couples, friends, and family members” (Burge, n.pag.). Moreover, they can serve as a bridge between cultures, as Lucinda Newns’s research on British-Muslim chick lit suggests. She claims that texts such as, for example, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s memoir *Love in a Headscarf* (2009) can “function as textual ‘translations’ between Islam and the liberal values deemed necessary for fully-fledged citizenship of modern Britain” (286). Minority-ethnic protagonists of chick lit often reflect on their hyphenated identities and show how they negotiate questions of assimilation and cultural authenticity in their every-day lives: “These characters usually explain to readers that they do not fit the criteria often used to signify their ethnicity and often align themselves consciously with cultural practices that signify dominant culture” (Hurt 4). For white readers, these texts hence often have an educational quality: they might serve as a corrective for prevailing stereotypes and challenge the assumptions white readers may have about other cultures and their perceived homogeneity. In addressing clichés about the culture of non-white heroines and simultaneously the expectations of their own communities, these texts carve out a space for hybrid identities and cross-cultural experiences. Moreover, they promote the visibility and diversity of characters of colour and give a voice to those who are often left out or silenced in mainstream Western popular culture so that they can address experiences of discrimination, oppression, and racism. Finally, for (aspiring) authors of colour, an additional incentive for writing chick lit might be the fact that the genre offers career opportunities in a book market that is interested in expanding its target audiences. As mentioned above, whereas (white) chick lit was declared dead by various news outlets and publishing houses at the end of the first decade of the 21st century due to falling sales figures, Ponzanesi and Butler and Desai claim that chick lit by writers of colour, particularly from India and China, for instance, has neither lost its appeal nor its readership and continues to grow strong (Ponzanesi 179/187 and Butler and Desai 28).

Carty-Williams’s *Queenie* addresses many of the above-mentioned issues. The negotiation of two cultures is already encapsulated in its title (and the protagonist’s name), which evokes both British and Jamaican associations: it connects the protagonist to a royal icon of Britishness and so implicitly comments on Queenie’s right to have a dignified place within British society, but also another literary character with ties to the Caribbean, Andrea Levy’s “Queenie Bligh” in *Small Island* (2004), and finally also a famous Jamaican Kumina priestess, Imogene Kennedy, who was nicknamed Miss Queenie[4], thus also nodding to her family’s origins. Carty-Williams has stressed that the search for identity and belonging, but most of all, the potential for identification for (young) female readers of colour were in fact her motivation for writing *Queenie*: “Representation is important, because I need to read something that I recognise and my children, if I have them, will need that too ... My plan at the start of this was that I wanted to do something that represents. That, ultimately, is why *Queenie* exists” (Carty-Williams in Sturges, n.pag.).

To my knowledge, it is the first novel by a Black British author that has been marketed as chick lit. It is not, however, the first British chick-lit novel by a writer of colour which has been marketed in that vein—Ayisha Malik’s *Sofia Khan* novels *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* (2015) and *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017), for instance, have been called “the Muslim answer to *Bridget Jones’s Diary*” (“In Conversation with Ayisha Malik”, n.pag.). While Black protagonists are nothing new in North American chick lit, they are rarer in the

British context. This is not to say that there are no contemporary books by female Black British writers that feature young female protagonists struggling with their identity, their mental health, experiences of racism, sexism, (sexual) violence, etc.. Recent texts by, for example, Diana Evans, Afua Hirsch, Yrsa-Daley Ward, and Bernardine Evaristo that deal with similar issues as Carty-Williams's *Queenie* have been classified as literary fiction or memoirs, whereas the novels by Black British writer Talia Hibbert, for instance, are usually categorized as romance. Ascriptions of genre are always somewhat arbitrary, since genre is best understood as "a set of expectations which guide our engagement with texts" (Frowe 104). Nevertheless, a look at the Goodreads page for *Queenie* shows that readers have not unanimously embraced the label "chick lit" for this novel either. Instead, the majority of readers filed it under the genre of "Fiction" (2051 users), whereas "Women's Fiction > Chick Lit" was attributed by only 113 users respectively at the time of research (September 2022) ("*Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams"). This may partly be due to the widespread dismissal of the term "chick lit" by critics, readers, and authors alike, because the genre is often seen as politically regressive or even antifeminist.[5] Although numerous scholars have by now provided a more nuanced analysis of the genre, the overtly political contents of the novel, such as the protagonist's mental health struggle, her experiences of racism, and the connection of these issues, might be another reason why the novel is not necessarily considered chick lit by some readers. Some of the other genre designations chosen by the Goodreads community indicate as much: 236 users chose to file the novel under "Health > Mental Health", 209 users chose "Feminism" and 197 chose "Race". Moreover, a lot of the media coverage that Carty-Williams and her novel have received also clearly frame both her and the text as feminist and anti-racist and highlight the important contributions that *Queenie* makes to debates about gender and race in contemporary Britain (and beyond).[6] Perhaps the reluctance to categorize the novel as chick lit is also due to the fact that the book industries have invented a new and less offensive label that can be applied to texts featuring a young protagonist on a quest more broadly, namely new-adult fiction, which is the genre description Carty-Williams's novel is given in its *Wikipedia* entry ("*Queenie* (novel)"). I contend that *Queenie* can be analysed as a chick-lit text, as it uses many generic conventions that are distinct features of chick lit according to my own and other scholars' and fans' definitions of the genre (see, for example, Ferriss and Young 2006, Smith 2008, Harzewski 2011, and Montoro 2012). However, like other texts by chick-lit writers of colour, *Queenie* has rewritten these conventions and has adapted them to its own purposes.

3. *Queenie*: Rewriting the Chick-lit Formula for the 21st -Century Black British Heroine, or: "[...] all men are trash, innit." (Carty-Williams 361)

Queenie uses chick-lit aesthetics and conventions like a shell: It adopts chick-lit features (from paratexts to form and content) that will make the text recognizable as such for readers of chick lit. At the same time, however, it adds overtly political elements such as sexism, racism, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, classism, and their intersections to show that the pursuit of love and happiness is not the same for people of colour. While in many of the classic white chick-lit texts from the 1990s and 2000s the heroines are mostly

confronted with gendered norms only, such as body and beauty ideals, traditional conceptions of femininity, sexism in the workplace, etc., the most pervasive—and destructive—norm that Queenie struggles with on top of this is whiteness.

Queenie's intersectional approach to chick lit is visible even from its paratexts. The first point of reference when it comes to identifying chick-lit is probably the cover design, since chick lit is famous for its bright or pastel-coloured schemes and use of stereotypically feminine-connotated imagery, usually consumer goods such as high heels, jewellery, and dresses, or baked goods such as cupcakes.[7] The cover design for *Queenie* alludes to this marketing tradition, but its representation of femininity is marked as Black. While the colour scheme is bright (my edition, Orion 2019, is pink, but other editions are orange, blue, and turquoise) and accompanied by gold-framed lettering (perhaps to underscore the royal connotation of the title), the illustration shows the side view of a female head with cornrows, the braids piled up high on the head like a crown, and big golden hoop earrings. The other paratexts, notably the praise by other authors indicates that the marketing is intended to address both readers of colour and white readers, and readers of literary fiction as well as chick-lit readers: the praise on the front cover is by famous white chick-lit and romance author Jojo Moyes, but when the readers open the book, they will find excerpts from reviews by other writers of colour, such as Malorie Blackman, Bernardine Evaristo, Nikesh Shukla, Afua Hirsch, Diana Evans, and Sharlene Teo, whose writings are well-known for critiquing Britain's race politics—but also from two more white chick-lit/romance authors, Jenny Colgan and Harriet Evans, whose work is not as readily associated with politics. In short, the paratexts seem to unite target audiences which are otherwise frequently addressed by separate marketing strategies.

Queenie also features many formal, narrative chick-lit elements. The confessional mode, intertextuality, textual hybridity, and use of humour—especially irony—have been identified as cornerstones of the genre (Mißler 33). *Queenie* is told from a first-person perspective, extensively uses the kind of self-deprecating humour and ironic undertone that readers who have read *Bridget Jones's Diary* will recognize, even if it does not imitate Bridget's downright comedic moments or her penchant for slapstick humour. *Queenie* also frequently uses hybrid text formats, that is, inserts such as text and chat messages, as well as emails, in order to make more space for other characters' perspectives, often to comical effect. This keeps the narrative relatively light-hearted and balances out the seriousness of the content. An obvious nod to *Bridget Jones's Diary* is Queenie's habit of list-making, for example, her New Year's Eve resolutions (192-3), many of which she then proceeds to break shortly after, just like Bridget Jones.

Another crucial premise for any chick-lit novel is the potential for identification with either the protagonist herself, ideally an "everywoman", like Bridget Jones, or the world she lives in (Mißler 10, 86). The following quote by chick-lit author Jane Green epitomises this idea of relatability—and of the perceived authenticity of the texts: "I think what we did was introduce a genre that really held a mirror to women, and held it with great honesty and humour. I don't think there was a genre of books where women were able to read and say, 'I've been there. That's exactly what my life is like'" ("Chick Lit 101"). Carty-Williams has made a similar case for her writing. Although she stresses that the book is not autobiographical, it was inspired by her own experiences[8]: "Writing this novel kind of felt easy in ways because so many of the ways that me and my Black female friends think, and our experiences, came pouring out" ("Kindle Notes and Highlights"). The relatability of the

texts is often heightened by references to contemporary popular culture—in *Queenie*'s case, these are often references to Black popular culture, for example, artists like Kelala or tv-shows like Issa Rae's *Insecure*, but also to political culture, like social-justice movements MeToo or Black Lives Matter.

On the level of content, chick lit is less easy to pin down because of the adaptability of the formula and its evolution after the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*, into, for example, different age groups, locations, professions, and so on. The plot element common to all chick-lit texts is that of the "female-driven quest for happiness" (Mißler 33), or the "transformational journey of a woman or group of women", as the website *Chick Lit Club*[9] puts it ("Chick Lit 101"). In many—although not all—chick-lit novels, the heroine's search for happiness culminates in a successful, monogamous, heterosexual relationship, and this is where *Queenie* most pronouncedly deviates from the chick-lit formula. While her romantic and sexual relationships with men do take centre stage in the novel, they largely serve to show that Queenie will not find happiness in them. Instead, the novel resorts to two other classic elements of chick lit and elevates them to a much higher level of importance: first, self-acceptance, and second, female friendships and solidarity. Queenie's quest to happiness requires her to put herself and her mental health first, and to rely on her family and her friends in the process, rather than on potential partners. Thus, the major obstacle she has to overcome on this journey is to recognize that her relationships with men (no matter the skin colour) have mostly been toxic and that this is due to her partners' implicit racial biases or openly racist worldviews.

The novel addresses many forms of racism and its intersections with class and gender on a systemic as well as an individual level. My categorization of different racisms is based on Camara Jones's work (2000) and on the resources offered by the NGO Race Forward in their 2015 *Race Reporting Guide*.^[10] Camara Jones provides a theoretical framework that distinguishes racism on three interconnected levels: institutionalised, interpersonal, and internalised. Institutional racism is defined "as differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race" and "manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power" (Jones 1212). Race Forward's definitions overlap with Jones's, but make a further useful distinction between institutional racism as emanating from institutions such as the police, schools, universities, etc., while structural racism defines the disadvantages resulting from institutional racism, such as the racial wealth gap, all-white workplaces, segregated communities, etc. Interpersonal, or, to use Jones's term, "personally mediated racism", comprises all forms of "prejudice and discrimination, where prejudice means differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intentions of others according to their race, and discrimination means differential actions toward others according to their race" (Jones 1212-1213). Finally, internalised racism is the "acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth" (Jones 1213). It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyse all of the instances of these forms of racism in *Queenie*, as they are quite numerous, so a few examples will have to suffice. The novel draws attention to both institutional racism, for example, when Queenie follows the news on the killing of innocent Black men by the police and attends a Black Lives Matter protest march, and when her attempts to write articles about race-related issues are rejected by her white boss, followed up by her male, white colleague's justification that "all lives matter" (213); and structural racism, such as the gentrification of Brixton, the resulting disappearance of Black businesses and the difficulty

of finding affordable housing, as well as the fact that Queenie is the first person in her family to earn a university degree, have a white-collar job, and go to therapy. The novel also delves deep into interpersonal forms of racism. There are frequent examples of everyday racism, such as white women touching Queenie's hair without asking permission, or accusing her of being aggressive when she speaks up for herself, or the use of the n-word by a member of her ex-boyfriend's family.

What the novel chronicles most vividly, however, is the experience of racism at the interpersonal level in contemporary dating culture, and the effects that this has in terms of Queenie's internalised racism. All of the men that Queenie dates (including her ex-boyfriend) invariably disrespect her, fetishize her body, view her as an object of desire rather than a human being, and/or reduce her to racial stereotypes such as the angry Black woman and drama queen. Her (ex-)boyfriend Tom dismissively ends one of their arguments about one of his family member's use of the n-word: "You are too much, Queenie [...] I don't want any more drama" (46). More pernicious yet is the stereotypization of Black women as sexually available and promiscuous, and the fetishization of the Black female body connected to it, both of which are discourses that Queenie is subjected to by her sexual partners. As Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe explain in their groundbreaking text *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, these stereotypes reach back to the days of slavery and still have an impact on Black women's lives today:

By labelling Black women as sexually promiscuous in this way, white men were thus exonerated for their sexual excesses under slavery. The function of this stereotype, even today, is neither to flatter nor bestow us with an identity as sexual beings. It is simply a justification for the centuries of sexual abuse of Black womanhood. (193)

Queenie exposes the legacy of this reasoning through numerous examples of male aggression, committed by men of various creeds, ethnic backgrounds, and social classes. There is Queenie's Pakistani acquaintance Adi and his obsession with "Black girls' *bums*" (52, italics in original), the racist messages Queenie receives on the dating app OKCupid ("Chocolate girl ;) " (60)), the abusive and humiliating sexual encounters with Oxford-educated Guy, which are suggestive of master-slave interactions ("Stop your noise, girl." (119)) and finally a particularly insidious case of victim-blaming when her work colleague Ted accuses her of sexual misconduct (269). All of Queenie's dates and partners, Tom, Adi, Guy, Ted, and Courtney, nicknamed "Balding Alpha", represent types or rather near-caricatures of men, as their three-letter names or nicknames indicate. In a manner similar to the typification and de-personalisation of men in *Sex and the City* as "modelizers", "Mr. Big", or "the Russian", the novel uses this tool of overgeneralisation to drive home the idea that the mistreatment Queenie suffers at their hands is not an exception but the result of a pervasively racist and sexist culture—which leads Queenie to ponder towards the end of the novel whether "growing up into an adult woman" really means "having to predict and accordingly arrange for the avoidance of sexual harassment" (365). Her friend Kyazike puts it more bluntly when she concludes, after hearing about yet another racist date, that "[all] men are trash, innit" (361).

Carty-Williams' take on the chick-lit genre clearly shows that the stakes are much higher for the Black female heroine in that Queenie's experience is presented as

intersectional—she has to deal with racism on top of sexism. Even if, at their core, both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Queenie* are attempts at setting the record straight and addressing the inequality of the sexes especially on an emotional level, it is undeniable that Bridget's and Queenie's dating experiences are markedly different, and that this is due to their respective ethnic backgrounds. Carty-Williams herself has stated in an interview that her experiences with dating have been steeped in racism:

I wanted to explore how, in the case of myself and lots of women like me, our sexual agency is still defined by someone else wanting something from us ... When it comes to black women and interracial dating you get accustomed to men saying, 'You're pretty for a black girl' or 'You're not usually my type'. And actually, when you're told that's what your value is, it's hard to say no because you begin to feel grateful for the attention. (in Sturges, n.pag.)

It is this link between self-worth and the attention from men that is responsible for Queenie's mental breakdown. Queenie is acutely aware of this connection: "I don't really want to have to spend the whole time sleeping with boys in cars and meeting crap men who do a good job of occupying my brain space but will ultimately diminish my self-worth" (78). Yet, this form of internalised racism commands her self-destructive modus operandi for most of the novel. It puts a strain on her friendships, costs her her flat, her mental health, and almost her career, as she is unable to break through her most harmful behavioural patterns, which are partly compounded by her traumatic childhood experiences of abandonment and psychological abuse by her mother's ex-partner, until she seeks professional help. Queenie can thus be considered the kind of chick-lit heroine who antagonizes the reader—a (not quite) anti-heroine, whose behaviour is not to be emulated, even though it may be one that some readers will recognize. Carty-Williams explains that Queenie's behaviour is a means of expressing social criticism:

As women we're taught to see our value through men. Do they like us? Do they fancy us? Do they want us to be taller, shorter, fatter, thinner? How does that make you see yourself? You don't see yourself as anyone important or as having anything to say. And unless you scrutinise it, you just take it on. I'm holding a mirror up to that. (in Keegan, n.pag.)

In Queenie's case, this pattern of thinking is particularly harmful because her desirability as a woman, which accounts for her self-worth, is contingent on something that she cannot control or change: her ethnic background. In one of her break-through moments in therapy she shouts at her therapist: "I can't wake up and not be a black woman, Janet. I can't walk into a room and not be a black woman, Janet. On the bus, on the tube, at work, in the canteen. Loud, brash, sassy, angry, mouthy, confrontational, bitchy" (335). Listing all of the negative stereotypes that Queenie is constantly confronted with in the majority-white society that she lives in illustrates the power of whiteness and the burden of racism that she has to carry in her everyday life, and how it affects her self-respect and mental health. This passage shows again just how relevant adequate representation is, and that, as Carty-Williams explains, "[t]hese presentations of Black women are reductive, and ultimately, they are unfair and damaging. They allow the narrative to be furthered in society that we

are these things we're shown to be" ("Queenie—Kindle Notes and Highlights"). The novel thus actively challenges these cultural imperialist narratives of white superiority and Black inferiority by exposing them as stereotypes and showing the mental damage they inflict on people of colour, since, as Bryan, Dadzi, and Scafe state, it is one of the central projects of cultural imperialism "to promote self-hatred among those it oppresses" (226). Queenie's behavioural patterns, especially her choices of sexual partners, are represented as a coping mechanism to deal with the oppressions she faces daily, so as to allow herself at least the illusion of being in power: "And if you're going to fuck me, then at least it's going to be in my control. [...] And do you know why? It's because I'm so damaged, Janet. Years of being told I was nothing, years of being ignored! I'll take any attention, even if it is being fucked!" (326). The novel thus constructs Queenie's mental health struggle as the result of her exposure to racist and sexist oppression in all areas of her life and also highlights the interconnectedness of systemic and individual forms of racism and sexism.

Consequently, Queenie's learning process and her path to recovery is to find self-worth, love, belonging, and respect in new ways, by forging a more meaningful relationship to herself, her family and her girlfriends. While this may sound clichéd at first, the novel traces this process without sentimentalising it. On the contrary, the representation of these alternative routes to healing and happiness is complex and not without further obstacles: Queenie has to deal with her grandmothers' initial aversion to psychotherapy and convince her that it is not something to be ashamed of; she has to reconcile with her estranged mother—another woman who has been traumatised from years of being in abusive relationships; and she has to face her girlfriend's Cassandra's wrath after the latter finds out that her partner Guy cheated on her with Queenie—without Queenie's knowing about their relationship. Despite Cassandra's betrayal (which, however, is only temporary as she eventually apologizes and the two reconcile), there is a noticeable shift in focus in the novel away from the love plot to the friendship plot, and it is perhaps best encapsulated by the fact that the tellingly named character of Darcy is not the male hero or love interest but Queenie's best friend. Darcy is not just another overt reference to *Bridget Jones's Diary* (and its respective intertext, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*), but also fulfils a crucial function for white readers of the novel: As a white, middle-class woman and Queenie's best friend, Darcy can be read as an ally, even as she struggles to understand what Queenie goes through. Although Darcy's socialisation marks her as middle-class and white—and the novel sometimes gently mocks her for this, for example, when she has to use urbandictionary.com to decipher Kyazike's text messages—she shows unfailing support of Queenie by sticking up for her at work and reaching out to Queenie's family to stay up to date on Queenie's well-being all while giving her the space she needs to get better. The novel thus also provides potential for identification for white readers and implicitly addresses them as a target audience. In addition to offering them the opportunity to adopt another perspective, white readers can learn how to be supportive, especially in situations which they themselves have never experienced or which they might not have considered problematic. Female solidarity and allyship, particularly in the form of providing safe, female spaces, whether digitally, such as Queenie's support group on Whatsapp, "the Corgis"—comprised of Darcy, Kyazike and Cassandra, or in real life, are shown to be powerful tools in upholding emotional wellbeing. In fact, the construction of these safe spaces is almost too dichotomous in the novel, as it is starkly gendered. All of the characters who abandon or abuse Queenie mentally and physically are men (Tom, Adi, Guy,

Ted, Courtney, her father and stepfather)—and almost all of the characters who support her are women—from her circle of friends, to her boss Gina and colleague Silent Jean at work, to Elspeth at the Sexual Health Clinic and Janet, her therapist, and finally her extended family: Her matriarchal grandmother, her own mother, her aunt Maggie and her cousin Diana (named after Lady Diana and providing another reference to the British royal family). The only odd one out is her grandfather, who, at the exception of one short passage towards the end of the novel is a mostly mute (but nevertheless supportive) presence in Queenie's life. The novel thus constructs a very strong example of a functioning sisterhood—by relation and by choice—even across cultural and ethnic backgrounds and strongly suggests that it is female solidarity that is the key to self-healing and to happiness, and not the monogamous, heterosexual relationship.

4. Conclusion: Chick Lit in the time of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter

Like other chick-lit texts by writers of colour, Carty-Williams's novel *Queenie* both utilizes and transcends the chick-lit formula. Using the formula strategically to reach a wider audience and to create a space for the Black British experience in the literary industries, the novel incorporates chick-lit aesthetics, the most conspicuous formal features of the genre, such as its intertextuality, textual hybridity, and humorous confessional narrative, and emulates the plot structure of a chick-lit novel, that is, the heroine's quest for happiness. However, it suffuses this quest with challenges which most white chick-lit heroines do not have to tackle. Representing the chick-lit experience from an intersectional perspective, *Queenie* shows how its heroine's struggles with various forms of racism, sexism, and classism in present-day London pervade her daily life and shape her identity as a Black British woman. Additionally, the novel offers an alternative solution for its heroine. Instead of finding love in the arms of a good man, *Queenie* constructs an ending that appears more timely in the days of the MeToo and the Black Lives Matter movement, as it privileges self-care, strong community ties, and female solidarity over romantic ambitions. The protagonist finds acceptance and happiness by returning to her roots, literally and figuratively: She temporarily moves back in with her matriarchal British-Jamaican family and she learns to accept herself and cherish her identity as a Black woman with the help of therapy and the support from her girlfriends and family. This departure from the traditional happily-ever-after of many romance narratives and chick-lit texts is mirrored in the symbolism of the protagonist's name, which is explained in the final pages of the novel: Her mother named her Queenie not because she is a "delicate princess" (319), but because she is "strong enough to be a Queen" (320)—the ultimate image of female power. In this sense, *Queenie* has put to good use the critical potential at the heart of the chick-lit formula and shows that discourses of romance and love cannot be thought separately from the politics of gender and race.

[1] For a selection of novels by chick-lit writers of colour, see, for example, Erin Hurt's edited collection *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* (Routledge, 2019).

[2] And, one might add, to British television, since *Queenie* is currently being adapted for the screen by Channel 4 (Broster, n.pag.).

[3] I use quotation marks for “ethnic” to show that I find the use of this term problematic for reasons explained by Sandra Folie, namely, that the distinction between chick lit and “ethnic” chick lit reproduces “the West vs the rest binary” (316). Folie elaborates: “There are at least three reasons why this terminological distinction is problematic. First, it suggests that white Anglo-American chick lit is not ethnic. Second, it indicates a hierarchy between the prototypical, or even original, chick-lit genre and the adapted subgenres or varieties subsumed under the term ‘ethnic’ chick lit.’ Third, this subsumption homogenizes the wide field of contemporary women’s fiction around the globe” (ibid).

[4] For more information on Miss Queenie, the Kumina priestess, see Bryan, Adichie and Scafe (1985/2018), p. 189 ff.

[5] For an overview of chick lit’s critical reception, see, for example, Mißler (2017), p. 19 ff.

[6] In the German context, Carty-Williams has even made it to the cover page of the popular feminist *Missy Magazine* (May 2020), which did not shy away from calling her the “Queen of Chick Lit”.

[7] For a more detailed analysis of chick-lit covers, see Montoro (2012).

[8] The conflation of author and protagonist is something that many chick-lit authors have encountered. In fact, some authors have used the perceived link between themselves and their heroines to construct highly marketable author personas. See Harzewski’s discussion of the so-called “gorge factor” (2011) and Emily Spiers’s discussion of the phenomenon in the British and German press (2018).

[9] Chicklit Club is one of the largest and most regularly updated blogs on chick-lit novels and an online gathering point for the chick-lit community. It has been active since 2007 (“About us”).

[10] For a similar framework, see Reni Eddo-Lodge’s definitions of institutional and structural racism in *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017), especially on pages 60-64.

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