

Hurt, Erin, editor. *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*. Pp. 234. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. £115.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-1380-9252-5. £39.99 (eBook), ISBN: 978-1-3151-0740-0.

Review by Sandra Folie

Published online: March 2020

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

More than two decades ago, chick lit was proclaimed the newest subgenre of romance, considered by some writers and critics so defiant of genre conventions that they would not count it as romance at all.[1] Since then, both the initial “unquestioning adoration of fans” and “the unmitigated disdain of critics” (Ferriss and Young, 1) have receded. Starting in 1996 with Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City*, chick lit broke with some well-established romance conventions such as the one man-one woman ratio or the unrestricted focus on the quest for great love in preference to portraying professional women who dated several men. The combination of romance tropes with more emancipated, economically independent heroines resonated with readers in a new era and triggered, in the words of *New York Times* journalist Rachel Donadio (2006), a global “Chick-Lit Pandemic” with similar novels springing up in various places and languages.

By 2011, however, the seeming death of the genre began to make headlines as sales figures declined, and the most famous chick-lit imprints – such as Simon & Schuster’s *Downtown Press* or Harlequin’s *Red Dress Ink* – had been dissolved. Likewise, the flow of academic publications on chick lit, relatively constant since Suzanne Ferriss’ and Mallory Young’s seminal collection *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (2006), also threatened to break off after Stephanie Harzewski’s *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011). Five years later, however, Heike Mißler put the frequently asserted death of the genre into perspective. In *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation* (2016), she describes chick lit as an extremely versatile and adaptable genre that has evolved beyond the so-called chick-lit formula of young metropolitan women – White, heterosexual, and affluent – looking for Mr. Right and a fulfilling career. Although the disputed label “chick lit” has now largely been replaced by “contemporary romance” or “women’s fiction”, the genre-defining humorous negotiation of the neoliberal promise that a woman can “have it all” has by no means become obsolete, but has rather evolved and diversified.

The collection of essays, *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, takes this development into account by focusing on chick lit about “women who have

complicated relationships with the one or more ethnicities and/or nationalities that they claim” (4). In the introduction, the editor Erin Hurt offers a thorough review of previous scholarship dealing with women-of-color chick lit both within and beyond the bounds of the United States.[2] Two articles she discusses in more detail are “Sistahs Are Doin’ It For Themselves” (2006) by Lisa Guerrero and “Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras” (2008) by Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai. While the first article is notable for identifying Terry McMillan’s novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) as the beginning of Black chick lit or *sistah lit*, Butler and Desai’s essay on South Asian American chick lit draws attention to the prevalent White-centricity in chick-lit scholarship. In her literature survey, the editor reveals the close interdependence between reading practices and theory formation when she argues that “[r]eading only white novels allowed postfeminism to emerge as the primary lens through which scholars understood chick lit” and that “in return, this theoretical approach encouraged the continual selection of white texts since it aligned most closely with their concerns” (Hurt 14). A common justification for the initial focus on White novels was that chick lit was mainly written by White authors (see Whelehan, 17-18). When the publication of more diverse chick-lit novels finally increased, scholars did not perceive them as belonging to the chick-lit genre, since they tended to elude the prevailing postfeminist mode of analysis. Furthermore, as Butler and Desai claim in the prologue, these novels met with a more general scholarly and critical rejection “of the feminine popular” (27), which largely eclipsed the newly acquired diversity and socio-political relevance of the genre. The contributions that follow the introduction and prologue of *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* are dedicated to various examples of this hitherto neglected development.

A recurring theme of the first two sections of this book is how women-of-color chick lit deals with ethnic and national stereotypes by navigating between the adoption of White genre conventions (e.g. chick lit, romance), recourse to non-White traditions (e.g. Black literature, Latinx literature), and independent narrative strategies. In her chapter on Anita Heiss’s *koori lit* – a term Heiss self-consciously coined for her novels featuring Aboriginal Australian women – Lauren O’Mahony identifies a strategic use of the romance- and career-related chick-lit plot. For example, Heiss uses the turbulent but usually happily ending search for Mr. Right to sugar the issues of systematic racism, cultural ignorance, and exoticization with which her characters are confronted. Thus, she questions and redefines stereotypes and “popular representations of Indigenous women and Indigenous culture” (44) within the parameters of an already popular genre. Felicia Salinas-Moniz, Jennifer Woolston, and Cherise Pollard recognize similar strategies in the examples of Mexican American, Asian American and Black chick lit that they examine. Although there is no formula for linking White and non-White genre conventions in women-of-color chick lit, many authors rely on both voluntary and enforced, spatial and metaphorical border crossings. For example, Jennifer Woolston illustrates how the Chinese-American protagonist in Kim Wong Keltner’s *The Dim Sum of All Things* (2004) and its sequel *Buddha Baby* (2005) develops from someone who “distances herself from anything Chinese or Chinese American as a response to her racialized and sexualized oppression” (105) to someone who, while escorting her grandmother to China, finally dares to face her family history and, as a consequence, gains a better understanding of her hyphenated identity.

The fact that another contributor to the volume, Jenny Heijun Wills, describes the same protagonist as someone who rejects anything Asian, shows that every reading of

literature always depends on who reads what and to what purpose. While Woolston concentrates on the development of the Chinese-American protagonist in two novels by the same author, Wills compares three novels by different authors with the intention of making broader statements about Asian-American chick lit. In her analysis of Michelle Yu and Blossom Kan's *China Dolls* (2007), Kim Wong Keltner's *The Dim Sum of All Things* (2004), and Caroline Hwang's *In Full Bloom* (2003), she observes a "disturbing reliance on a forever foreigner stereotype" (71) that manifests itself in the contrasting juxtaposition of asexual unattractive Asian-American men, and submissive exotic Asian-American women, as well as in the devaluation of Asian cultural practices.

By providing "a conversation, with voices that respond to and disagree with each other" (212), the entire collection of essays convincingly illustrates that women-of-color chick lit is extremely versatile and heterogeneous, which also applies to various (sub-)categories such as Asian-American chick lit. Importantly, women-of-color chick lit is certainly not immune to stereotyping simply because it is concerned with the lives of non-White women. While typical elements of the chick-lit plot can be strategically employed to convey issues faced by minorities, their use can also have the effect of normalizing Whiteness from the perspective of narrators and characters of color. This is the case, for example, when the Asian-American female protagonist in *The Dim Sum* has reservations about dating Asian-American men and, in the end, falls in love with an Asian-American man passing for White.

The third section entitled "Decentering Whiteness" brings some of the already indicated findings into a theoretical perspective. In her reading of Erica Kennedy's African-American chick-lit novel *Feminista* (2009), Heike Mißler claims that Whiteness functions as "the unmarked category" (138). Although the struggles of the novel's biracial protagonist expose gendered neoliberal ideals of femininity, domesticity, and marriage as raced, the happy ending is, according to Mißler, "at worst a reinstatement of the normative ideal, and at best, a way of making-do with the system which chick-lit heroines seemingly cannot elude" (147). She proposes considering the neoliberal fantasies mediated by the genre as a continuum between two extremes. That suggestion pertains to many women-of-color chick-lit novels. While all contributors to the volume perceive the titles they discuss as a compromise, some argue that the adaptation of White chick-lit tropes is a legitimate and even promising way to address more controversial, culturally specific issues (O'Mahony, Salinas-Moniz, Woolston, Pollard), whereas others stress the potential danger that such a compromise could entail (Wills, Mißler, Hurt).

For example, in her analysis of K. L. Brady's Black chick-lit novel *The Bum Magnet* (2009), Cherise Pollard considers the use of the White chick-lit trope of consumption to be positive, because it helps to frame the Black tradition of "healing as a kind of commodity that can be consumed" (120). In her concluding remarks, however, the editor points out that such neoliberal framings of non-White tropes run the risk of undermining the important cultural work many non-White chick-lit novels seek to do by

centering middle-class professional protagonists of color, engaging in consciousness-raising, making visible the varying configurations of oppression and prejudice that protagonists face on a daily basis, and showing women navigating the conflicts many face when straddling multiple cultures and socioeconomic classes. (212)

Hurt considers the potential of women-of-color chick lit endangered by the neoliberal logic prevalent in many novels, in particular by their depiction of “structural obstacles, such as racism, sexism, and poverty, as capable of being solved at the individual level” (213). In her analysis of the Black chick flick *Girls Trip* (2017), she shows that even though the film criticizes neoliberal ideas – the lead character Ryan publicly exposes her own perfect life, through which she earns her living, as a lie – it cannot help reproducing what it set out to criticize (219). As it turns out, Ryan’s confession rewards her with even more money than keeping up appearances. According to Hurt, such pseudo-solutions are characteristic of the most cunning neoliberal fairy tales; namely those that deliberately distract from their conformist fantasy world through a diverse cast and a rather superficial neoliberal criticism.

Hurt’s essay on “The White Terry McMillan”, however, is less concerned with neoliberalism than with literary history. In what is probably the most provocative and also the richest contribution to the volume, she positions McMillan’s Black chick-lit novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) “as a simultaneous originary text” (152) next to Fielding’s and Bushnell’s “urtexts”. Hurt does not focus on the question of who came first, but on the establishment of plural genre genealogies. Therefore, she discusses the romance trope in Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) as well as representations of womanhood in Black women’s magazines as historical reference points for Black chick lit. The derivation of chick lit from nineteenth-century authors such as Jane Austen or Edith Wharton, or from career-girl novels and feminist bestsellers of the twentieth century (see Harzewski and Whelehan) may well work for White chick-lit novels, but it hardly seems adequate for their Black counterparts. Consequently, Hurt formulates a long overdue call for action: “to create a literary history, and a way of reading, that accounts for all of chick lit’s ethnic categories and in doing so create many new scholarly conversations about chick lit that attend to the many different novels that constitute this genre” (171). This call for the elaboration of different literary “herstories” seems to correspond with Suzanne Ferriss’ (2011) earlier demand “that more work needs to be done by chick-lit scholars to develop meaningful connections among ‘feminist bestsellers’ of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries”.

Although romance and chick lit do not necessarily engage directly with feminist politics, they are usually in dialogue with feminism or rather feminisms in the plural. What might look like an adaptation of a neoliberal feminist ideology from a Western White analytical perspective is perhaps a much more complex entity, consisting of several transnational or postcolonial feminisms. While readings of chick lit as “neoliberal fantasies” (Mißler, 131-149) or “neoliberal fairy tales” (Hurt, 211-224) seem perfectly reasonable for most of the novels discussed in the collection, these renderings may be brought into question when thinking of women-of-color chick lit not exclusively in an Anglophone US American or European context. For instance, when analyzing Saudi author Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* (2005 in Arabic; 2007 in English) – the only Arabic chick-lit novel mentioned in the volume – neoliberal feminism is probably an inadequate frame of reference. Considering the political situation and the cultural and religious traditions of Saudi Arabia, it would certainly be advisable to consider local liberal and Islamic feminisms. Moreover, Hurt’s suggestion to read women-of-color chick lit against the background of neoliberal ideology is not entirely consistent with her line of argument regarding postfeminism. In the introduction, she criticizes the fact that postfeminism, with its White lineage that inevitably excludes other, non-White brands of feminism, is often used as an almost obligatory theoretical basis for

discussions of chick lit. I wonder whether the genealogy of neoliberal feminism that Hurt seems to advocate as a preferred analytical framework for women-of-color chick lit is not equally in danger of being biased towards a White and Western perspective as postfeminism.

In the fourth and final section, "Authorial Voices", Linda Chávez Doyle, Kavita Daswani, Kim Wong Keltner, and Sofia Quintero narrate their motivation to write, and their relationship to Mexican-American, Indian-American, and Asian-American chick lit. The most fruitful statements, from a theoretical point of view, relate to the possibilities and potential pitfalls of writing in genres marked by both gender and ethnicity. These range from, at best, connecting "with the ethnic reader" and informing "the non-ethnic reader" (Doyle, 191) to, at worst, perpetuating stereotypes and appealing only to "a limited fan base" (182). Doyle's differentiation between "ethnic" and "non-ethnic" already points toward a problematic assumption: namely that White readers (or characters, authors) are not ethnic. As a consequence of setting Whiteness as the non-ethnic default, so-called "ethnic" authors face problems that White authors rarely have to deal with: if their stories rely too heavily on popular images or explain the cultural context in too much detail, they run the risk of being too flat and clichéd for "ethnic" readers. On the other hand, if a story requires too much cultural (or even linguistic) knowledge, it could discourage White readers who are often pivotal solely because of their superior number and purchasing power. Moreover, according to Quintero, many female writers are still confronted with the presumption that their literature "cannot be both profitable and meaningful" (208), which usually applies "when the stories or creators reflect and center marginalized experiences, especially if they challenge the dominant narrative as best or innocent" (208). The fact that cishet White male writers are seldom expected to make a choice between either commercial success or literary substance, and that they are rarely confronted with derogatory gendered and/or ethnic labels reveals the persisting double standard of the literary market; they are perceived as the norm and their texts, by implication, as universal, whereas works by women, and especially by women of color, are all too often labeled as not entirely relatable. This alleged lack of identification also leads to a lack of visibility. "Ethnic" chick-lit novels have repeatedly been rendered invisible by the excessive presence of White chick lit in the media as well as in research. The bibliography at the end of the book serves as a countermeasure to this disparity. By grouping 146 non-White chick-lit novels (in comparison to only 37 White novels), it aims "to encourage scholarship on these works" (Hurt 22). Furthermore, the bibliography eradicates the opposition between "ethnic" and "non-ethnic" by explicitly naming White chick lit as White and by differentiating women-of-color chick lit according to nationality or ethnicity. Nevertheless, the classification scheme would have benefited from an explanation. It seems to be primarily based on the ethnic background of the authors and/or fictional heroines, but sometimes also on linguistic ("Arabic Chick Lit") or religious markers ("Muslim Chick Lit"). In categories that combine geographical regions beyond the West with ethnicities in the United States such as "East Asian and East Asian American", it is not immediately apparent (and in parts entirely unclear) which works are originally written in English and which works are translations from other languages.

The inconsistencies in the bibliography point to the problem of categorization which, despite the evocative title of the first section "Categories of Chick Lit", was slightly neglected throughout the volume. Since normative Whiteness – one of the main topics of the book – is also inscribed in literary categories, it is all the more surprising that this issue is not explicitly addressed. It certainly makes a difference when we talk about chick lit whether we actually

mean *White* chick lit. To preface chick lit with ethnic markers, however, seems to be common only for chick lit by women of color. There have been only a few, more radical counter-labeling efforts such as Guerrero's coinage of the term *sistah lit* or Anita Heiss's *koori lit* which both have a close connection to the respective culture and need not be prefaced with either "African-American" or "Indigenous Australian". At the other end of the spectrum are very broad categories like "BIPOC (black, Indigenous, and people of color) chick lit" (Wills 70) or *White* chick lit that contribute to the perpetuation of an already widespread thinking in binary categories such as black/white, ethnic/non-ethnic, the west/the rest, etc. However, very specific terms might also lead to an over-particularization and even to literary nationalism or ethnicization. Just as an example, one could well debate whether or not Chinese or Korean-American chick lit would be a more appropriate label than Asian-American chick lit. Ultimately, there must be names for things, or, in Quintero's words: "As much as we fear being hampered by labels, we cannot go to the other extreme where words no longer mean things" (210). The rapidly growing and ever more specific literary labeling found on websites like Amazon and Goodreads or in readers' advisory guides illustrates the great demand for classification. Since labels will probably neither disappear any time soon nor become inclusive or specific enough to satisfy all authors, critics, and readers, it is all the more important to discuss them critically: who speaks for whom in the global literary market, in what way, and based on what assumptions?

Erin Hurt's edited volume, while not explicitly dealing with labeling practices, makes an important contribution to this conversation by highlighting numerous genres such as *koori lit*, Asian-American chick lit, *chica lit*, or Black chick lit that otherwise often disappear behind a vague "ethnic" label. Moreover, throughout the volume, and particularly in Hurt's and Mißler's contributions in section IV, Whiteness is named rather than accepted as an invisible norm. Hopefully, the important discussion in this book about ethnicity and nationality in the chick-lit genre will prompt scholars working in (but not limited to) the field of popular romance studies and/or with genres that are considered traditionally female and *White* to look out for more intersectional literary genealogies. To view genres not as hierarchical "trees", with one common, usually monolingual and/or monocultural root, but rather as "rhizomes" with multiple beginnings, might lead to pluralistic and interrelated literary herstories that have the potential to deepen our understanding of contemporary literary phenomena.

---

[1] While *Romance Writers of America* (RWA) initially listed chick lit as a regular subgenre (e.g. for contests), some chick-lit writers finally split off because they felt disadvantaged by their choice of genre. They set up their own website, "Chick Lit Writers of the World", which emphasized both the similarities and differences to the romance genre (RWA: "Chick Lit Roots"). Today, their website or "Special Interest Online Chapter" of RWA is called "Contemporary Romance Writers", which is understood as a "massive romance subgenre", including "Contemporary Romance, Suspense, New Adult, Young Adult, Chick Lit, Romantic Comedy, Women's Fiction, and more" (RWA: "About").

[2] The edited volume is primarily concerned with women-of-color chick lit set in the US, which is why the editor discusses this strand of research in more detail. However, in the introduction, Erin Hurt also mentions several works dealing with women-of-color chick lit beyond the US, e.g. Chinese chick lit (Chen; Ommundsen 2008 and 2011), Indian chick lit (Ponzanesi), Saudi Arabian chick lit, and Aboriginal chick lit (Ommundsen 2011).

## Works Cited

- Butler, Pamela and Jigna Desai. "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras. Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-31.
- Chen, Eva. "Shanghai(ed) Babies: Geopolitics, Biopolitics and the Global Chick Lit." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2012, pp. 214-228.
- Donadio, Rachel. "The Chick-Lit Pandemic." *The New York Times*, 19 March 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/books/review/the-chicklitter-pandemic.html>. Accessed 29 July 2019.
- Ferriss, Suzanne. "Review: Harzewski, Stephanie. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, <http://jprstudies.org/2011/12/review-chick-lit-and-postfeminism-by-stephanie-harzewski/>.
- Ferriss, Suzanne and Mallory Young, editors. *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Guerrero, Lisa A. "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White." *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 2006, pp. 87-101.
- Harzewski, Stephanie. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- Missler, Heike. *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Ommundsen, Wenche. "From China with Love: Chick Lit and The New Crossover Fiction." *China Fictions, English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, edited by A. Robert Lee. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008, pp. 327-345.
- "Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference." *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 5, no. 2, July 2011, pp. 107-124.
- Ponzanesi, Sandra. "Postcolonial Chick Lit: Postfeminism or Consumerism?" *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 156-227.
- Romance Writers of America (RWA): "About Contemporary Romance Writers." <https://contemporaryromance.org/about/>. Accessed 2 August 2019.
- "Chick Lit Roots." <https://contemporaryromance.org/about/chick-lit-roots/>. Accessed 2 August 2019.
- Whelehan, Imelda: *The Feminist Bestseller: From "Sex and the Single Girl" to "Sex and the City"*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.