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Black British love matters: Asserting the transformative power of love in Bolu Babalola's *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales Around the World Retold*

Irene Pérez-Fernández 

Department of English, French and German Philology, University of Oviedo, Spain

ABSTRACT

The genre of romance has until fairly recently predominantly depicted white protagonists and presented readers with limited representations of ethnic and racial diversity. This paper provides an overview of the ever-increasing number of Black British authors who are currently addressing this significant gap in the British publishing industry and analyse Bolu Babalola's debut *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales Around the World Retold* (2020) as a case in point. *Love in Colour* is a collection of short stories which questions the universality of western tales of love and celebrates Black love and heritage. My contention is that Babalola's collection, for its innovative elements, not only evinces that contemporary Black British women's writing, characterized by aesthetic and formal innovations, continues to "test simple generic categories", but, in its celebration of the transformative power of love, also demonstrates that Black love matters.

KEYWORDS

Black love; diversity; Black British romance; Bolu Babalola; *Love in Colour*; transformative power of love

Introduction: Black British romance

Romance, as a genre, has been justifiably criticized for its predominant depiction of white protagonists and its limited and stereotyped representations of ethnic and racial diversity (Ali 2018a, 2018b; Beckett 2019; Kamblé 2014; Young 2021). Jayashree Kamblé has stated that "romance novels are by no means objective registers. After all, they are commodities that are typically developed in accordance with mainstream convictions" (2014, 23) which in the British and American context has entailed "heterosexuality and whiteness as the normative state for romantic experience" (23). As Kamblé's study of popular romance fiction evinces, the supposed universality of love and romance is indeed specific: "the alleged 'universal' nature of mass-market romance fiction can be seen to contain a narrative that normativizes said Westernness – and more accurately, whiteness" (2014, 131). In consequence, further developments are necessary both in the publishing industry and in academia so as "to address the genre's racial gaps and to explore the more inclusive romance fiction that began to proliferate in the 21st century, as well as to denaturalize the constructed cultural narrative of whiteness" (Young 2021, 512).

CONTACT Irene Pérez-Fernández  perezirene@uniovi.es  Departamento de Filología Inglesa, France y Alemana with Department of English, French and German Philology, University of Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain

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In the American publishing context,

niche publishing abounds today, both within and outside the mainstream. African American, Young Adult, Christian or Inspirational, and LGBTQIA romances, all of which have a long and well-established niche, have gained renewed vigor at the outset of the new millennium and are thriving as never before. (Markert 2021, 362)

Nonetheless, in the British context, the interest in the publishing industry for diverse romances in general, and Black British romances in particular, has been scantier and relatively recent. According to Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente, “the publishing industry is set up to cater for just one white, middle-class audience” (2020, 23) and “despite the successes of writers of colour, from Malorie Blackman to Zadie Smith, writers from minority backgrounds nonetheless struggle to get their books published or reach certain audiences” (9). Thus, considerable changes within the industry in general are required to tackle its problems with diversity.

Taking into consideration this gap in the British publishing industry, this paper concisely traces the rising number of authors publishing Black British romances, delves into the ongoing debate about the convenience of the label “Black British romance” by contextualizing the discussion within the larger tradition of Black British women’s writing, and ultimately examines Bolu Babalola’s (2020) collection of 13 short stories, *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales from Around the World Retold*, which decolonizes tales of love and decentres Eurocentric perspectives, as a case in point. The collection combines a first section of ten short stories devoted to the revision of ancient tales with a section entitled “New Tales”, comprising three modern tales of love. I shall pay particular attention to two of the mythical tales that Babalola rewrites, “Psyche” and “Nefertiti”, and one modern tale, “Tiara”. Ultimately, I argue that *Love in Colour* is a groundbreaking compilation of Black British romance with its innovative elements and its celebration of the transformative power of love (hooks 2006), whose aesthetic, thematic, and generic innovation is more conveniently understood and contextualized within the larger tradition of Black British women’s writing.

Diversity in the British romance publishing industry

The last seven to eight years have seen the publication of a substantial number of literary works that have provided readers with representations of Black love, which have met the growing and justifiable demands of readers seeking love stories depicting Black British love. As author Sareeta Domingo has argued, “those of us residing in the intersections of identity and seeking to find refuge in a love story might struggle to feel truly represented. [...] early on in my life I was resigned to the notion that I’d have to filter that feeling through a lens of whiteness” (Domingo 2020a, n.p.). These works, which have been (un) problematically labelled “Black British romance”, as I shall discuss in the next section, include Bolu Babalola’s collection of short stories *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales from Around the World Retold* (Babalola 2020) and her campus romance *Honey and Spice* (Babalola 2022); Maame Blue’s (2020) *Bad Love*; Sareeta Domingo’s (2020b) *If I Don’t Have You, Love, Secret Santa* (Domingo 2019), *The Nearness of You* (Domingo 2016), and her edited collection of short stories *Who’s Loving You: Love Stories by Women of Colour* (Domingo 2021); Frances Mensah Williams’s (2020a) novels *Imperfect*

Arrangements and *Sweet Mercy* (Mensah Williams 2020b), and her chick-lit novels, *From Pasta to Pigfoot* (Mensah Williams 2015) and its sequel, *From Pasta to Pigfoot: Second Helpings* (Mensah Williams 2016); Andi Osho's (2022) *Asking for a Friend* and *Tough Crowd* (Osho 2023); or Talia Hibbert's The Brown Sisters Series: *Get a Life, Chloe Brown* (Hibbert 2019), *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* (Hibbert 2020) and *Act Your Age, Eve Brown* (Hibbert 2021). Although some of these authors have been published by mainstream publishing houses, independent publishers have been essential to diversify the mainstream publishing industry¹ since some leading publishing houses have only recently attempted to provide decolonized fiction lists, which "involves tuning into cultural sensitivities that were not previously considered" (Anim-Addo, Osborne, and Sesay 2021, 11). Anim-Addo, Osborne, and Sesay's study acknowledges that "markets drive publishing just as publishing can create new markets" (2021, 11), and poses problematic questions such as whether "mainstream publishers [are] ever able to truly engage with minoritized cultures" (11).

The above list of newly available Black British romances accomplishes considerably more than filling a gap in the British romance publishing industry. They infuse traditional romantic narratives with thematic and aesthetic innovation and are concurrently charged with politics in that they depict empowering Black role models and offer diverse love stories with characters who shatter entrenched conceptions in the collective imaginary of the Black experience in the UK, which more often than not is connected to stories of trauma, unbelonging, and underachievement. Their stories transcend these stereotypes and present a wide range of experiences, predominantly of successful middle-class and upper-class Black characters. Additionally, these romances decentre non-Black readers' expectations and allegedly universal western conceptions about love.

What is more, these works force non-Black readers to acknowledge and reflect upon inherited white privileges; that is, to recognize that "whiteness and white privilege dominate all aspects of society" (Bhopal 2018, 27) and to understand "that those from non-white backgrounds, because of their identity, are positioned as inferior to whites in a society in which white identities predominate" (27), which is a form of political and decolonial with activism, one that is of great significance in the context of the UK, where, as Kalwant Bhopal (2018) continues to argue,

if you are from a black minority background you are three times more likely to be excluded from school, more likely to be unemployed, more likely to live in poverty, more likely to be physically restrained in police custody and more likely to be prosecuted and sentenced. (9)

Drawing upon Jessica P. Pryde (2022), I argue that these romances are

mirrors *and* windows that will offer us a safe and enjoyable experience – free from not only the race-based trauma that literary fiction might present, but also free from overly heteronormative, homo – and transphobic narratives that are still commonplace in genre romance. (xviii; emphasis in original)

This does not mean that the characters do not face racial inequalities; quite the opposite. The main characters engage in various forms of personal and community activism so as to transform the social environment that surrounds them and to fight the sociocultural factors under which discriminatory and racist practices continue to operate. Thus, while asserting the politics of reading for pleasure, these Black British romances celebrate love

as a “politically loaded issue” (Jónasdóttir 2013, 11). Bearing this in mind, it is my contention that they constitute an essential subgenre within the larger tradition of Black British literature and, in particular, within the field of Black British women’s writing.

Since Bernardine Evaristo’s (2019) *Girl, Woman, Other* was awarded the Booker Prize in 2019, there has been an exponential recognition and international interest in Black British women’s writing, yet the field has been a flourishing one since the turn of the century. The previous literary successes of Zadie Smith’s (2000) *White Teeth*, Andrea Levy’s (2004) *Small Island* and *The Long Song* (Levy 2010), Diana Evans’s (2006) *26a*, and Bernardine Evaristo’s (2009) *Blonde Roots* have been taken as poignant examples of the success and quality of Black British women’s writing. Even if it is undeniable that these works portray Britain as a multi-ethnic and multicultural society and continue to address questions of displacement, discrimination, (un)belonging, and genealogy (Weedon 2008), which were key thematic concerns of first-generation writers, as anthologies of Black British women’s writing published in the 1980s testify (Cobham and Collins 1987; Dadzie and Scafe 1985; Grewal and Kay 1988; Gunew 1982), nonetheless they do so by foregrounding formal experimentation (Brophy 2010; Burkitt 2012; Cuder-Domínguez 2009), which is a salient characteristic of the literary production of Black British women writers.

In relation to aesthetic innovation, Suzanne Scafe has argued that “although black women’s writing might be thought to express a minor key in contemporary [British] literary production, their fiction has transformed and continues to test simple generic categories” (2015, 226). Likewise, Elisabeth Bekers and Helen Cousins state that “their experiments with language, style, and genre put Black British women at the vanguard of the British literary scene more broadly” (2022, 211) and they reflect upon “the extent to which precedence has been given to the politics over the aesthetics of their writing” (211). The recently published Black British romances in general, and Babalola’s collection in particular, continue the trend of aesthetic and generic innovation by being outstanding additions to the flourishing subgenre of Black British romance which is one in need of further specific scholarship.

Black British romance: What’s in a label?

As with “Black British women’s writing”, the label “Black British romance” is also problematic and difficult to define. On October 20, 2021, Black British authors Talia Hibbert, Andi Osho, and Frances Mensah Williams participated in an online round table moderated by Dr Amy Burge. Dr Burge’s opening question addressed precisely the core of the matter – “How would you define Black British romance?” – to which the three authors provided thought-provokingly different answers. For Hibbert, Black romance is “a story that concerns black principal characters that’s written by a black person [...] it’s something with a central love story, but there’s disagreements as to whether it needs a happily ever after or not” (Burge et al. 2021, 16:36:35–16:36:58).

Mensah Williams and Osho, while acknowledging the importance of representation and agreeing with the definition posed by Hibbert, displayed ambivalent feelings about the label “Black (British) romance” in that, as Osho states, “the reason that we have to have it is because of the lack of representation, because if all things were being equal and

fair, we would be well represented amongst the mainstream body of work” (Burge et al. 2021, 16:38:43–16:39:13). Similarly, Mensah Williams argues that

one of the big reasons I started writing, you know, popular fiction or romance, call it what you will, is because I just wanted to normalize having everyday people that just looked like me in books about their stories without them having to be in any way kind of “extraordinary” and it’s just the stories of their lives, like the stories of everybody’s lives, so that representation is important. On the other hand, even if you, I guess, one thing I always say is *black is not a genre*. (16:37:44–16:38:17; my emphasis)

A common element in these definitions of Black romance is precisely the questions of representation of Black characters in romance narratives or lack thereof. In relation to the paramount importance of diversifying the genre of romance, Osho makes an incisive comment:

I feel like when one is able to write stories about these underrepresented groups, the specificity brings the universality so I want people to read this book, no matter what their background is and just feel like this is a, this is a story about two people trying to fall in love. (Burge et al. 2021, 16:41:23–16:41:40)

Osho and Mensah Williams highlight the universality of the stories they create and by so doing criticize the belief that “for too many in the [publishing] industry, books by writers of colour are still considered niche rather than having universal appeal” (Evaristo 2020, 4). Indeed, the importance of recognizing the universality in the specific is a fundamental idea that the above-mentioned writers of romance share,² a crucial point that was already raised in the scholarly work about the convenience of the category Black British literature published at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century (Arana and Ramey 2004; Dawes 2005; Getachew 2005; Lola Young 2005; McLeod 2010; Sesay 2005). Lola Young (2005) argues precisely that “the texts under discussion in this volume are both about the specific kinds of experience and the universality of experiences. For too long, writing about black people has been thought of as ‘special interest’ or worse still, ‘special pleading’” (2005, 13), and Kadija Sesay states:

Dare I even admit it? I don’t even refer to myself as Black British, I’m African British and for many of us, that is not so much as new terminology, but one that was not acknowledged in literature that we read or even in the African diasporic environment we found ourselves in. (2005, 16)

It is currently agreed that “the designation of ‘Black British’ as a literary category was instrumental in giving Black writers in Britain more visibility and opportunities for publishing their work” (Bekers and Cousins 2022, 211). Likewise, I argue that the label “Black British romance” is an adequate and necessary one to refer to the ever-increasing number of romances asserting and celebrating Black British love.

The field of Black British romance, labels notwithstanding, is still “under researched, despite the fact that myths and narratives perpetrating female oppression in contexts of romantic love often perpetuate oppressive narratives about women of colour” (Beyer 2022, 56) and in spite of the number of Black British authors who are currently addressing this gap in the British romance publishing industry, partially filled in the North American context with the creation of specific series by specialized romance publishing houses such as Harlequin Kimani. The surge of Black British

authors writing romance testifies to the expansion and innovation within the larger field of Black British women's writing into genres that have been predominantly peopled by white characters and, where diversity romances have mainly featured Afro American heroes and heroines. Thus, the importance of the romances traced in this article is to address, engage, and depict³ the (love) experiences and realities of Black and Afro Caribbean British communities, an inherent part of British society. Literary works such as Babalola's *Love in Colour* are poignant examples within the subgenre of contemporary Black British romance.

Babalola's *Love in Colour*: Rewriting the mythical canon and adapting the chick-lit formula

Bolu Babalola's collection of 13 short stories evinces both the aesthetic innovation that characterizes Black British women's writing and the celebration of the transformative power of Black love. The collection infiltrates and decolonizes the traditional literary canon in the English language by "offer[ing] a corrective to reverse the dominance of white-dominant literary canons" (Anim-Addo, Osborne, and Sesay 2021, 4), and does so through the genre of the short story, which has been analysed as the very fruitful way of conveying "knowledge which may be in some way at odds with the 'story' of dominant culture" (Hanson 1989, 6). Thus, I argue that the fact that Babalola's collection broadens mainstream romantic representations of love, of who loves and how they love, through the genre of the short story, testifies to her interest in innovation, since romantic narratives are mostly associated with the genre of the novel.

The collection's generic innovation is also evinced in the mythical tales that are incorporated, which draw from various cultural traditions and mythologies – including Yoruba, Persian, Roman, Egyptian, Ashanti, Lesothan, Ghanaian, Chinese, and Greek – as well as timescales, by dividing the collection into two parts: one devoted to the retelling of ancient tales and comprised of ten short stories, and the second one entitled "New Tales", which includes three modern tales of love: "Tiara"; "Orin", loosely based on bad dates experienced by Babalola herself; and "Alogomeji", inspired by her parents' love story. Babalola engages with the original tales but re-imagines them for a contemporary readership seeking to celebrate Black love. As Babalola states:

I have the honour and privilege of exploring how the power of love has been expressed within a variety of cultures around the world. I pay homage to the textures of each original tale while also adapting them to fit a new, modern age. (ix-x)

Thus, delving into the collection becomes much more than a vicarious act of reading for pleasure, and allows readers to "see how oppressive hegemonic discourses within original stories are uncovered, challenged, and reimagined from new, hitherto silenced perspectives, thereby changing and transforming those original narratives" (Beyer 2022, 60). One of the most remarkable features throughout the first part of the collection is that Babalola removes patriarchal elements embedded in the original myths and tales and deliberately chooses to celebrate formerly forsaken female protagonists by foregrounding their agency and their capacity to love and show affection in multidimensional ways. The stories depict diverse and well-rounded female characters who demonstrate their love in various forms and towards different orientations that are not exclusively a love interest in

a romantic sense. These include love for themselves, for others, for their country, and for justice.

Drawing upon bell hooks's (2006, 250) notion of "love as the practice of freedom" and her contention that "the moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others", I examine the mythical tales "Nefertiti" and "Psyche", from Persian and Roman mythology respectively, and one modern tale, "Tiara", as three empowering stories of love that not only liberate the protagonists from intersecting forms of oppression, but also celebrate the potential of Black romantic love to cement more inclusive sociocultural environments. That is, following Ann Ferguson, I argue that love is depicted in these short stories as a "political force" whose power as "a radical force for gender [and racial] equality" (Ferguson 2017, 9) is clearly underlined. Babalola's stories depict Black romantic love relations that are emancipatory, since the love story is inextricably connected to and supported by environments and "radical social movements that challenge existing systems of domination – capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, anthropocentrism" (9).

"Nefertiti": Warrior, leader and lover

"Nefertiti", the seventh short story in the collection, depicts a strong, educated Queen Nefertiti, an innate leader and warrior, owner of the "House of Aten" (Babalola 2020, 136): "the largest, most (in)famous bar, club, home, sanctuary in Thebes City, Kemet" (137). After Akhen, Nefertiti's husband, passes away, the club is turned by Nefertiti into a safe haven for women who, like herself, have been discriminated against and mistreated by abusive men whose chauvinistic ideas are sanctioned in the patriarchal society that surrounds them: "and so I lived free, turning the House into a home for women only, a place for lost women to find themselves" (140). Babalola's tale transcends the traditional depiction of the 14th-century Queen of Egypt who promoted Atenism and whose beauty, sexuality, and femininity has been overtly emphasized by historians (Fletcher 2004). Such an oversexualized notion of Nefertiti was mainly cemented by the bust of Nefertiti created around 1340 BC, presently in the Neues Museum, Berlin, which promoted and venerated her as an icon of beauty: "She is Egyptian stone architecture [...] *Nefertiti is femaleness made mathematical, femaleness sublimized* by becoming harder and more concrete" (Paglia 2001, 69; my emphasis).

Babalola's rendition shatters such an entrenched and restrictive conception and resignifies Nefertiti as a queen/warrior who fights against a corrupt government and its debased policing system. Nefertiti avenges other women's suffering and, together with the women she leads, takes justice into her own hands in order to level out the balance of power: "'Everything', I [Nefertiti] ran my eyes across him, 'on your body that you used to hurt your wife shall be removed. I think that's reasonable'" (Babalola 2020, 135). The official media, such as the newspaper *Thebes Telegraph*, demonize the House of Aten as a "cabaret lounge where women, and women only, have the privilege of becoming guerrillas, indulging their vices while organising protests and civil disruption" (138) and the government declares that the House "has evolved into a dangerous misandrist cult and directly contributes to societal unrest and decay" (138) and, thus, condemns Nefertiti and her actions to fight against patriarchy and corruption.

Once a widow, Nefertiti directs her love interest towards other women, another element which destabilizes the heteronormativity endorsed in the ancient tale. In Babalola's short story, this attraction for other women is used by the government to set a trap to end Nefertiti's life, yet it ultimately becomes the freeing force that saves her. Ma'at, an undercover member of "the Duat", who "were the guardians of Isfet, and they were the ones who enforced their evil" (Babalola 2020, 144), is sent to the House of Aten for her "devastating beauty" (174) to attract and capture Nefertiti. Ma'at succeeds in her mission to entice Nefertiti and put her in danger:

when the Duat officer dragged me [Nefertiti] from my bed and hurled me against the wall and told me to put my hands up and not move, I didn't move, but I did chuckle. I looked at Mattie as she pointed her gun at me, still in my robe. (155)

Nonetheless, in a twist at the end of the short story, Ma'at kills her Duat officer partner, thus evincing how she has recognized Nefertiti's plight and hinting at her forthcoming union with the House of Aten. The emotional and sexual encounter with Nefertiti awakens in Ma'at feelings that become the catalyst for this change; she finds in love a force for sociopolitical change through which she questions the status quo and her role in the Duat. As Babalola's Nefertiti expresses it:

that night she [Ma'at] offered herself up as a shield so I could be soft, be myself, be loved like a precious thing. She embraced all of me, kissed my jagged scar. That night House of Aten became *home to a new freedom*. (155; my emphasis)

It is love that enables this freedom that liberates both women; Ma'at is freed from a life serving those who oppress her peers and Nefertiti finds a safe space where she is allowed to lay down the burden of being the guardian of other women. Nefertiti becomes the one who is cared for, embraced, and caressed. She is enshrined by the power of love and affection, rather than by a mythical tale merely promoting her iconic beauty.

"Psyche": A muse to ignite change

The eighth story in the collection, "Psyche", re-imagines the life of the Greek goddess of the soul to depict, once again, "the difference that love can make as a positive force, both in personal and in social relations" (Ferguson 2017, 23). In addition, Babalola's short story decentres the whiteness of the mythical goddess by purposely avoiding a physical description of Psyche beyond the reference to "two shots of espresso in the form of a sweet, kind, sharp-tongued, diamond-eyed girl" (Babalola 2020b, 44) and by depicting an Eros whose "dark curls were immaculate dishevelled and moisturized, his bronze skin looked like he'd just come back from Mykonos" (41). The protagonist, Psyche – or Psy, as she is known by friends and colleagues – is depicted as the young mentor of Venus Lucius, *Olympus* magazine's fashion editor, who aspires to "be promoted from her assistant to an editor in her own right" (39). Psy finds herself in an oppressive environment where both her professional and personal aspirations are constantly thwarted by Venus: "Venus was strong, smart and capable, but also incredibly ruthless [...] that's why she did everything in her power to suppress Psy" (43). Venus' callousness goes to the extent of preventing her own brother Eros' happiness. Eros' heart is conquered by Psy's beauty which emanates from her soul and dismantles Eros' preconceptions about love:

“Eros fell in love the moment he met Psy [...]. He had his flirtations, transient stints, tequila-tainted kisses, quick unzipping and clothes ripping, *but it was all empty* [...]. *Until he met Psy* (49; my emphasis). When Venus finds out about their mutual attraction, she threatens Eros with destroying Psy’s career – “You need to stop whatever you’re doing with my assistant or I’ll fire her” (53) – thus turning their love story into “the Greek tragedy that was her [Psy’s] romantic life” (46).

In spite of the multiple forms of oppression Psy faces, she succeeds in her professional endeavour by proposing directly to Hera, “Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Olympus* magazine” (Babalola 2020, 56) to create a new campaign called “Muse”,

with the aim of centering the everyday woman. She can be her own muse. She doesn’t need to look outside, she can look within, and we want to inspire all women to do the same. Activists, humanitarians, thought-leaders, in the clothes and make-up that make them feel most powerful. [...] we could potentially revolutionise and challenge the concept of a universalised beauty standard. I mean, what really *is* beauty? We have a chance to assert that sartorial and aesthetic inspiration should ultimately come from who we are. (57)

Psy’s campaign encourages women to be self-assertive and to love and accept themselves by expanding the concept of beauty to include the soul. Psy not only fights against the tyranny of beauty, but also celebrates diversity and undermines homogeneity and superficial conceptions of beauty, represented in the short story by the shallow and authoritarian Venus. What is more, Psy transforms the negative feelings that surround her in an oppressive working environment where she is constantly intimidated and belittled by Venus into a positive drive to initiate social change.

Drawing on Ferguson and her development of bell hook’s notion of love as the practice of freedom, I argue that Babalola portrays a Psy who has come

to understand that all social movements for social justice – whether against racism or class exploitation, ethnic or religious bigotry, nor just for feminist attacks on patriarchy – depend on reversing the transmission of negative energies and releasing love energies that are bound up in dysfunctional power relations. (Ferguson 2017, 24)

In so doing, Psy not only fulfils her professional aspirations and promotes social change, but she also overcomes the barriers preventing her love story with Eros to reach a happy-ever-after ending, which symbolically is also the short story’s ending:

when they kissed [...] Eros felt as if what they had was not just above the world as they knew it, but beyond it, out of its touch, its scope, itself propelling energy that catapulted and vacuumed them into their own universe. (Babalola 2020, 64)

They are rejoicing in the potential of love to transform the world around them; celebrating, indeed, the power of love as both the practice of freedom and as a political force. Ultimately, “Psyche” includes components of the chick-lit formula. Not only is the protagonist an editor, but it is her agency and professional interests that drive the story, a fundamental feature of the genre since “the coming of age or maturation of the heroine, in chick lit is usually rewarded by a happy ending with her love interest, but it is her personal development which is at the centre” (Mißler 2017, 31). Babalola blends the retelling of the classical myth with elements of chick lit and underscores innovation as a prominent feature of the collection, as in the case of the short story that I shall discuss in the following section.

“Tiara”: A millennial Black Bridget Jones

“Tiara”, the first short story from the second section of the collection “New Tales” and the last short story to be discussed in this article, epitomizes the mixture of generic innovation with the ongoing theme of the empowering potential of love. “Tiara” revolves around the life of Tiaraoluwa Ajayi, depicted as a “young millennial black girl” (Babalola 2020, 226) who has successfully reinvented herself after a break-up and is now writing her memoir. The short story draws upon the chick-lit formula, in terms of both content and form, yet it adapts it and bends it to achieve particular effects. As regards content, “Tiara” focuses on “the heroine’s desires in general, and these are by no means limited to men” (Mißler 2017, 31), as is the case in chick-lit novels. In terms of form, the short story is written in the first person, with a clear confessional mode, “marked by its intertextuality and hybridity; and most notably by its use of humour and irony” (Mißler 2017, 31). In fact, the short story opens with the first two points of a list entitled “Tiara’s Top Tips” of things to do when you “bump into an ex-boyfriend in public” (Babalola 2020, 225). Tiara is writing the list, inspired by her own experiences while sitting “cross-legged in bed in an over-sized shirt, phone open on Instagram, laptop open on Word [...] I have been shovelling dry granola into my mouth – my stress comfort food of choice” (226). This is a rendition of the protagonist that undoubtedly reminds readers of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), which is considered a foundational chick-lit text (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2007; Hurt 2019; Mißler 2017) and responsible for the “chick-lit craze that followed” (Markert 2021, 361).

Tiara’s stress eating is directly connected to the fact that her ex-boyfriend, Seye Ojo, is coming back to London after having been away in Los Angeles for two years. The break-up was motivated by his moving there due to an opportunity in his acting career and Tiara’s refusal to leave everything behind to follow him: “My career and my dreams are nothing to lose?” (Babalola 2020, 230). Tiara prioritizes her independence and her self-acceptance, which is another characteristic of chick lit. Yet her decision to stay is also marked by her understanding of the intersection of gender and race as systems of oppression: “Are you forgetting that I’m a black woman? It’s twice as hard for me. Seye, if I go, it needs to be on my own terms” (230). Politics is woven into the short story not only through the inclusion of such a passage, but also by opening it with a rendition of Tiara which clearly reminds readers of Bridget Jones – nonetheless, a “Black” Bridget Jones who is well aware of her ethnicity and its sociocultural implications in both Britain and America. This, in turn, calls readers’ attention to the structure of whiteness and the “white-centric gaze” (Hurt 2019, 12) that has predominated in chick-lit scholarship by evincing that “Bridget Jones, as the result of her white, middle-class, naturalized British privilege, does not contemplate her cultural identity or worry about how she defines her ethnicity or nationality” (9).

Much like what Heike Mißler (2023) argues in relation to Candice Carty-Williams’s (2023) *Queenie*, it could be contended that “Tiara” is an example of Black British chick lit and that by means of this short story Babalola “has innovatively politicized 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” (2). Babalola’s short story interrogates “issues of race and ethnicity, diaspora, and belonging, among others” (Hurt 2019, 10) by drawing upon

a quintessential British fictional hero, that of James Bond, but in this case a Black James Bond, to refer to Seye when at the end of the short story he knocks at Tiara's door, having missed the British award ceremony in order to declare his unconditional love to her:

You left me to try and figure out if I had just imagined that what we had was real or not. If you ever really loved me or not. Then you show up at my door in a tux like black James Bond. (Babalola 2020, 243)

This reference could not be more significant. James Bond as a fictional MI6 agent features prominently in the British collective imaginary to the extent that even the late Queen Elizabeth II appeared in a sketch with James Bond (starring Daniel Craig) in the opening of the 2012 Olympic games, as a proud, even if comic, display of national identity at a time when the eyes of the world were on Britain. In Babalola's short story, this "Cold War hero: deadly and debonair; global, yet reassuringly Anglo Saxon" (Miller 2011, xiii) is rightly appropriated by Tiara to reflect her experience and codification of the said icon. Much like Babalola's rendition of Tiara as a Black Bridget Jones, Tiara's description of Seye as a Black James Bond expands this quintessential cultural British icon to truly reflect Britain's diverse society, thus adapting the chick-lit formula to decentre readers' expectations and "make the happiness and companionship we all deserve seem more real" (Jones 2022, 219).

Conclusion: Decentring western tales of love

The lack of diversity in the British romance publishing industry has been recently addressed by Black British authors offering nuanced and groundbreaking representations of Black love. I have briefly traced the surge of Black British romances filling a substantial gap in the publishing industry. It has been my contention that these romances do much more than depicting diversity in romance in the British context; they infuse traditional romantic narratives with thematic and aesthetic innovation; they decentre white, Eurocentric renditions of love, for too long taken as universal; and they offer a more realistic representation of contemporary British society. What is more, I have argued that they constitute a much-needed subgenre within the larger tradition of Black British women's writing, characterized by aesthetic and formal innovation. Babalola's *Love in Colour* needs to be considered as a stepping stone within this larger tradition in that it continues to unsettle literary conventions and "test simple generic categories" (Scafe 2015, 226).

Babalola transcends conventional romantic narrative modes through the genre of the short story to create an innovative collection which questions the universality of western tales of love and the centrality of Greek and Roman mythology in cementing depictions of passion and affection. The three short stories that I have discussed not only advocate racial justice and gender equality, they also celebrate the power of love and validate love's potential for igniting sociocultural and political changes by showing that "love is that light. Romance sweetens the casual bitterness we can encounter; it heightens the mundane and makes the terrestrial supernatural" (Babalola 2020, ix). Ultimately, *Love in Colour* evinces that Black British love matters and that "there is something utterly transformative about being exposed to Black Love" (Pryde 2022, xviii).

Notes

1. Some of these literary works, such as Mensah Williams's or Blue's novels, have been printed by independent publishing houses devoted to diverse literature, like Jacaranda, an award-winning publisher "committed to publishing ground-breaking writing with a dedication to *creating space* on the *bookshelf* for diverse ideas and writers" (Jacaranda n.d.; emphasis in original), whereas others, such as Domingo's, Babalola's, Hibbert's and Osho's books have been published by Hachette, Headline, and HarperCollins respectively, mainstream leading publishing houses, and Hibbert initially self-published some of her works: proof of the role of the publishing industry in supporting authors and constraining or creating new markets.
2. The authors' claim to recognize the universal in the specific might seem to pose an apparent contradiction with the discussion about the need to problematize allegedly universal conceptions of love that are indeed rooted in specific experiences. The authors' point of view contributes to the debate and scholarship that challenge the concept of universal love as equated with white-centric conceptualizations of love by expanding and questioning said universality.
3. As Moody-Freeman states: "Romance fiction by African American authors and featuring African American protagonists, like other popular romance, follows the Romance Writers of America's (RWA) required elements: 'a central love story' and 'an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending'" (2021, 229). African American romances have a longstanding history, dating back to the 19th century, and are thus "one of the oldest literary forms in African American literature" (Dandridge 2004, 2). There are well-established subgenres of African American romance including "contemporary, historical, paranormal, erotic, suspense, and religious/spiritual" (Moody-Freeman 2021, 229), as well as a wealth of scholarship in the field (see, for example, Dandridge 2004; Hendricks and Moody-Freeman 2022; Moody-Freeman 2021).

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Notes on contributor

Irene Pérez-Fernández is Senior Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Oviedo. Her research focuses on contemporary British literature and Black British Women Writers in particular. She has published articles on Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith and Diana Evans in various journals (*Atlantis*, *Callaloo*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*) and has co-edited *Romantic Escapes: Post-Millennial Trends in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction* (2021).

ORCID

Irene Pérez-Fernández  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8910-365X>

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