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"Genre Bending and Blending in Malorie Blackman's Noughts and Crosses YA Series"[1]

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Introduction

Contemporary Black British writer Malorie Blackman has successfully explored different literary genres and aesthetically interrogated dominant cultural forms to produce works which continue to depict Britain's ethnic and cultural diversity and to engage with socio-historical matters. Questions of identity, (un)belonging and genealogy run as an undercurrent in contemporary Black British women's writing – together with thematic concerns already addressed by first-generation writers[2] who explored from the 1980s problems of racial discrimination, displacement, and the search for roots (Weedon, 2008; Fernández Rodríguez, 2013). Since the turn of the century the literary impact of highly successful novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Diana Evans' *26a* (2006) and Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) or *Blonde Roots* (2009), to name but a few, were seen as indicative of the burgeoning field of Black British women's writing,

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[2] These thematic concerns feature prominently in anthologies which are considered as literary forerunners in the field of Black British Writing and thus have become seminal works representing the state of Black British Women's Writing in Britain in the 1980s such as Margaret Prescod-Roberts's *Black Women: Bringing It All Back Home*, Sneja Gunew's *Displacements: Migrant Storytellers*, followed *by Displacements II: Multicultural Storytellers*, Centreprise Trust's *Breaking the Silence*, Stella Dadzie, Beverley Bryan and Suzanne Scafe's *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, Barbara Burford, Jackie Kay et al's *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets*, Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins's *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*, Lauretta Ngcobo's *Let it be Told*, and Shabhnam Grewal, Jackie Kay et al's *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*. Doing justice to the rich field of Black British Women Writers since the 1980s goes beyond the scope of this chapter, yet these anthologies include works by writers who paved the way for younger authors such as Malorie Blackman. Buchi Emecheta, Joan Riley, Beryl Gilroy and Amryl Johnson are other first-generation Black women writers who published their works in the 1980s and added a gender perspective to the experience of migration to and settlement in Britain as previously depicted in the well-known works, for example of George Lamming's *The Emigrants* or Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*.

which has culminated in Evaristo becoming the first black women and black writer to win the 2019 Booker prize for her latest novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). These literary works continue to depict Britain's multiethnic and multicultural nature and engage with history, yet, with the exception of Andrea Levy's *Small Island,* they transcend traditional modes of narration– such as the Bildungsroman or the realist novel. The above-mentioned novels are characterized by formal experimentation, the incorporation of magic realist elements or the presentation of dystopic realities; aesthetic features which have been amply examined in academic research (Bryce; Brophy; Burkitt; Cúder-Domínguez; Gendusa; Muñoz-Valdivieso; Pérez-Fernández; Toplu). The range of subjects surveyed and the aesthetic and formal innovations displayed in contemporary Black British women's writing evince a determination to unsettle literary conventions and, as Suzanne Scafe argues:

> [a]lthough black women's writing might be thought to express a minor key in contemporary literary production, their fiction has transformed and continues to test simple generic categories. Their work actively intervenes in contemporary novelistic traditions, extending and transforming the genre in bold or in more subtly challenging ways. (226)

Blackman shares some of the aforementioned thematic trends and enriches the Black British narrative tradition by transcending conventional narrative modes and venturing into traditionally less acclaimed genres. Her literary versatility has taken her to produce more than 50 books, including children's novels, YA novels, picture books, short stories and, an edited anthology of short stories and poems to commemorate the bicentenary anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, entitled *Unheard Voices* (2007). Blackman's prolific literary career has been recognized by readers and literary critics alike; she has been awarded numerous prizes including the Red House Children's Book Award, the Fantastic Fiction Award and the Eleanor Farjeon Award, a prestigious prize awarded to authors for their outstanding contribution to Children's literature; in 2008 she received an OBE for her services to children's literature. From 2013 to 2015 Blackman was appointed Children's Laureate[3] becoming, thus, the first black laureate

[3] The Children's Laureate is a position awarded in the UK to "an eminent writer or illustrator of children's books to celebrate outstanding achievement in their field". The author receives, as well, a bursary of £15,000. Quentin Blake was the first Children's Laureate (1999-2001), followed by Anne Fine (2001-2003),

and a forceful advocate for black and ethnic minority children's needs and rights. Certainly, producing Children's and YA literature which provides readers with much needed BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) characters has been a constant in Blackman's literary production. As she has declared: "I thought, I wanted to write the kind of books I would have loved to have read as a child" (Rustin n.p.). Indeed, Blackman identifies the lack of realistic BAME characters in children's books in the United Kingdom as a key factor that motivated her writing:

> I remember going into a bookshop and the only book I saw with a black child on the cover was *A Thief in the Village* by James Berry and I thought, is this still the state of publishing? Then I thought either I can whine about it or try to do something about it. So that was a major reason for me wanting to write books for children, because I wanted to write all the books I'd missed as a child. (ibid)

By focusing on the first three novels in Blackman's YA Noughts and Crosses series (2009-2019),[4] I argue that the author's investment in formal innovation continues to unsettle the British literary tradition through an aesthetic that expands genre boundaries, unravels generic fixities and explores the intersections between gender, class, and race. It is my contention that through such generic innovation Blackman unpacks the cultural underpinnings of practices of oppression and discrimination, questions historical exclusions and portrays the ethnic and cultural diversity that characterizes contemporary British social fabric. With this ethico-political agenda in mind, I delve into the first three novels in Blackman's YA Series, namely, *Noughts & Crosses* (2001), *Knife Edge* (2004) and *Checkmate* (2005), which feature ethnically diverse characters as their main protagonists. I argue that these novels serve a double purpose; on the one hand, they fill in a gaping hole in YA British literature, which has traditionally failed to portray issues of cultural and ethnic diversity. On the other, they are a literary exercise of re/writing dominant discourses around love, as well as a tool to re/right socio-historical wrongs.

Michael Morpurgo (2003-2005), Jacqueline Wilson (2005-2007), Michael Rosen (2007-2009), Anthony Browne (2009-2011), Julia Donaldson (2011-2013), Malorie Blackman (2013-2015) and Chris Riddell (2015-2017).

[4] The Noughts and Crosses Series initially started as a trilogy and this is the reason why I focus on these three novels in this article. The trilogy was subsequently expanded with the publication of *Double Cross* in 2009 and *Cross Fire* in 2019.

Generic Innovations

YA fiction as a genre has been predominantly white in terms of authors, editors and characters. As Patty Campbell has argued in relation to the American context, "[f]or a long while YA fiction depicted an all-white, mostly middle-class world" (Campbell 15). Likewise, for Michael Cart multicultural YA literature "remains the most underpublished segment of YA", (Cart x) even if since the 1970s "publishers actively [have] encouraged black writers" (Campbell 15). In the context of British YA literature, Blackman's Noughts and Crosses series can be considered as a diversity forerunner within the burgeoning British YA market, an industry which, as in the American context "is dominated by white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgendered, heteronormativity (in its workforce, authors and characters)" (Ramdarshan "The Eight Percent Problem" 385). In her study of YA print titles published between 2006 and 2016, Melanie Ramdarshan Bold highlights the lack of diversity despite the various conferences, initiatives and grassroots movements, such as We Need Diverse Books, which have appealed for more culturally and ethnically diverse authors and characters in the Anglo-American publishing industry ("The Eight Percent Problem" 386). In her subsequent monograph, *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (2019), Ramdarshan presents a dramatic scenario in YA publishing in Britain: "[w]hile the statistics show that 7.8% of all YA titles published between 2006 and 2016 were by authors of colour (bearing in mind that ethnic minorities make up 14% of the UK population), only 1.5% were by British authors of colour" (146). This lack of diversity in the publishing industry does not mirror the nation's socio-cultural and ethnically diverse reality; as Laura Atkins has also argued "the number of books published falls far short of reflecting the population of young people living in the U.K., and is even less representative than the books [by authors of colour] published in the U.S." (n.p.). Ramdarshan concludes that this situation should be read as another effect of the inequalities that continue to operate in contemporary British society: "structural inequality is embedded deeply in the British book industry, as it is in wider society" (*Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* 146). This might help to understand why the YA authors she interviewed in the book "found that the British book publishing industry is characterised by liberal, progressive, whiteness that while not always explicitly racist is often coloured by implicit racism, unconscious biases, and micro-aggressions" (ibid).

Few are the publishing houses in the UK which have committed themselves to publishing books for children and young adults which feature issues of diversity: Frances Lincoln, Tamarind and Vezani Publishing are the most significant ones (Atkins n.p.). In this bleak scenario, Na'ima B. Robert's *From Somalia with Love* (2009), Bali Rai's *(Un)arranged Marriage* (2001) and *Killing Honour* (2011) or Sita Brahmachari's *Artichoke Hearts* (2011), together with Blackman's Noughts and Crosses series stand out as noteworthy examples of diverse YA titles available to readers. Blackman's series is particularly remarkable since it is published by Penguin Random House, one of the world's leading multinational publishing companies. As stated on their website, Penguin "publishes 70,000 digital and 15,000 print titles annually, with more than 100,000 eBooks available worldwide" and is "proud to count more than 70 Nobel Prize laureates and hundreds of the world's most widely read authors" ("Our Story" n.p.). Despite these numbers, Blackman and Bali Rai, a British Asian author, are the only two main British authors of diverse YA fiction published by Penguin Random House. Laura Atkins, describes Blackman's YA novels as "books based on a high concept (race relations reversed in a sort of parallel universe) … written in commercial, page-turning prose" (n.p.). Her reference to them as "commercial" and "page-turning" reads as diminishing of their literary value, an idea that is strengthen by Atkins' remark that this "drive towards more commercial and accessible books, and a focus on one or two successful authors, can restrict the types of voices and stories published" (ibid). By contrast to Atkins, I argue that Blackman's YA series raises thought-provoking questions from a socio-historical perspective and presents innovative elements from a generic point of view.

Such generic innovations entail that the three initial novels in the series, and the sequels that followed, defy easy categorization. Her work, described as "book[s] of hate" in Blackman's official website, has been defined in Penguin's official website as "a seminal piece of YA fiction; a true modern classic" and, according to the *Evening Standard*, the novels have also been categorized as thrillers: Blackman is described as "a terrific thriller writer", as featured on the blurb of *Checkmate*. The first three novels in the series have also been reviewed in *The Guardian* within the section of "children's books" (SilverRoo n.p.). In her interview with Blackman, Alison Flood refers to them as books about the development of a relationship, as they focus on the protagonists' growing up processes, describing how: "[their] childhood friendship … blossoms into an adult relationship" ("'Dire statistics'" n.p.). The series has also been advertised and described as a re/writing of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* tragedy: "a modern-day version of

Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* in that it tells of a forbidden relationship" (Carter 25) or "Romeo and Juliet-style romance" (Rustin n.p.). As such, the first novel has been adapted by the Royal Shakespeare Company to be performed in 2007-2008. What these different definitions show is that these novels present a challenge from a generic point of view and this makes them difficult to label according to restrictive generic approaches. In fact, the novels introduce innovations in the genres of YA and romance fiction and in their allegedly formulaic characteristics.

In this respect, I argue that the novels are characterized by slippery generic conventions, or genre blending. According to Michael Cart: "just as the lines of demarcation dividing adult and young adult readers has increasingly blurred since the late 1990s, so have the lines separating genres. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of romance fiction, where genre bending and blending have become commonplace" (115). Such bending and blending is of paramount significance in the first three novels of Blackman's Noughts and Crosses series, which combines features of romance and YA fiction, two genres that have traditionally been approached with disdain from a literary point of view and which might explain the implicit criticism in Atkins' earlier-mentioned reference to Blackman's YA novels.

Like romance in its multiple varieties, YA literature has been marginalized and deemed unworthy of critical attention; more often than not critics consider that "young adult literature is worthless and inferior to classical texts and adult literature" (Cole 57), or "regarded as 'transitional literature', useful primarily as a bait for reluctant readers" (Campbell 6). For Roberta Seelinger Trites adolescent literature, as she refers to YA literature, has at its core the experience of portraying adolescents who are to navigate different power hierarchies and "characters created by adults writers test the limits of their power within the context of multiple institutions for the benefit of adolescent readers who supposedly gain some benefit from experiencing this dynamic vicariously" (54).

YA fiction, nonetheless, performs a fundamental educational function that goes beyond providing readers with a mere entertaining and vicarious experience since, besides serving as a form of escapism, it enlightens them about the complex process of entering adulthood. According to Patty Campbell "the central themes of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the internal and external questions, 'Who am I and what am I going to do about it?' … an in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that moves towards shaping an adult identity" (70).

In order to attract the attention of its readers, YA literature is usually characterized by eye-catching titles. Blackman's series, Noughts and Crosses, is not incidentally named after a game that is used to encourage logical thinking in children. In fact, the series' title, which coincides with the title of the first novel, should be decoded as yet another mechanism employed by Blackman to draw attention to the illogical rhetoric behind racial segregation and racial superiority. Like the game evoked by the title, Blackman's work offers entertainment but also enlightens readers. The novels thus align with critics who have stressed the importance of YA literature "social and cultural impact" (Andersen 14) and its influential potential in the tackling of "important and sensitive subjects, covering everything from abuse to poverty to sexuality to race to religion" (ibid). In this sense, YA literature is a malleable genre and has "become one of the most dynamic, creatively exciting areas of publishing" (Cart 272).

Likewise, and despite persistent pejorative reviews (Gelder), romance fiction has indeed adapted and changed like no other and has worked within the changing times (Tapper 251). In this context, "the popular romance novel is a dynamic cultural form, and publishers and writers respond to readers' interests and cultural changes in a way that is unmatched by most other types of publishing and popular media" (Lee 54). In my understanding of Blackman's novels as examples of romance, I draw upon the definition proposed by the U.K. Romantic Novelists Association (RNA) by which "a romantic novel can encompass virtually any novel where the plot involves a love story in some way" (Teo). This definition is less restrictive than those proposed in the United States and Australia where "a romance novel consists of 'a central love story' and 'an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (ibid). Much has been written on the genre of romance (Modleski; Illouz; Ramsdell; Regis; Frantz and Selinger; Kamblé) since Janice Radway's seminal work *Reading the Romance* (1984) established that "escape and relaxation" (58) were the two main motives given by readers who are believed to approach the genre as a way of creating a fantasy world where they experience the deeds of the heroine as if their own. Overall, it can be argued that theoretical approaches to romance have been characterized by a polarized view: those which approach romance novels "as conservative forms that uphold the existing patriarchal structure, or as subversive and resistant forms that challenge the existing structure" (Lee 54). I argue that Blackman's YA novels align with the latter: with their ethical and political agenda they discredit the bias that for some critics exist in both YA literature and romance literature and with their slippery generic conventions they align with a progressive approach to romance which goes beyond a

perception of it as conventionally formulaic (de Geest and Goris) and emphasizes the heterogeneity, malleability and potential for innovation of a genre that even if "often criticized, marginalized and mocked. … [is] the most popular of all genres of fiction" (Lee 52).

Love is indeed the driving force in Blackman's series. The novels revolve around the impossible love story between a black girl, Sephy (her full name is Persephone), and a white boy, Callum, in a dystopic world where black people, or "Crosses", are the ruling elite and white people, or "noughts", are confined to minority status, have little or no legal rights and find themselves doing primarily menial jobs. Their love story is doomed to failure as it transgresses class and racial boundaries: Sephy is the daughter of Jasmine and Kamal Hadley "one of the most powerful, ruthless men in the country", as described in the blurb of *Noughts & Crosses,* and Callum is the son of Meggie McGregor, an employee in the Hadley's household. Sephy's and Callum's childhood friendship develops into a romantic attachment that culminates with the death of Callum and the birth of their daughter, Callie Rose. Their relationship transgresses social norms in a background of prejudice, racism and violence. In such a setting, Callum's brother, Jude, joins the Liberation Militia (LM), a military organization fighting against nought discrimination, and Callum follows suit when his dad, Ryan, is electrocuted to death in prison after being falsely accused of a lethal bombing at Dundale Shopping Centre.

In the following sections, I argue that Blackman's series incorporates some of the narrative mechanisms of romance and discards others, thus bending the conventions of the genre. The most significant omission in Blackman's first novel in the series is the ending, which does not include matrimony between the main lovers: Sephy and Callum or in Regis's words "betrothal" between heroine and hero (Regis 30). Although there is no marriage possibility for them, yet at the allegorical and literal level, the birth of their daughter Callie Rose symbolises a more powerful union than that conferred through the rite of marriage. The characters are able to overcome the barrier(s), which Regis identifies as crucial to the development of romance (ibid),– as social prejudice, family boundaries and legal obstacles continue to – set them apart. Moreover, the point of ritual death which for Regis "marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible" (Regis 35) becomes a literal death for Callum. Additionally, Sephy's name is symbolically reminiscent of Regis's description of this ritual death. For Regis, it is the romance's heroine who is "often the target of ritual death, and beneath her very real trials in the narrative is the myth of death

and rebirth, which echoes, however remotely, the myth of Persephone" (ibid). As in the myth, the romantic heroine must escape her death "to live to see her betrothal and the promise of children that it brings" (ibid). However, Blackman's Persephone does not need to marry Callum to achieve happiness and personal fulfilment, and the second and third novels in the series focus on Sephy's life beyond her initial romance with Callum and on Callie Rose's maturing process, as I shall discuss later on.

Writing and Righting Wrongs

Blackman's first three novels in the series right fundamental wrongs within British YA literature. Indeed, Blackman's novels are a literary exercise of re/writing dominant discourses and re/righting socio-historical wrongs. The first novel, *Noughts and Crosses*, focuses on the development of Sephy and Callum's love story and their trials and tribulations, and culminates in the unfortunate events which tear them apart. Their first separation is presented as a product of fate when Sephy's letter to Callum asking him to elope with her to avoid boarding school does not reach him in time, in a scene reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "I [Callum] didn't even have to close my eyes to remember the sight of Sephy's car driving away from me that day. My life might've been different if I'd read her letter on time, if I'd managed to reach her car before it sped away from me. I might've been alive, instead of ice-cold inside" (378). Callum is depicted as dead inside after he is wrongly led to believe that Sephy has abandoned him when she leaves town for boarding school. He also feels discriminated against by society and channels his anger through the Liberation Militia (LM), where he becomes one of its youngest sergeants. Their final separation comes at the end of the novel, with Callum's execution after his cell in the LM have kidnapped Sephy so as to extort her powerful dad. While Sephy is under the control of the LM, the first and only sexual encounter between the two young lovers occurs, resulting in pregnancy. The novel thus presents a sexual encounter between the two teenagers that materializes within a specific context of uneven power-relations; Sephy is Callum's prisoner, even though the novel presents it as a consensual act: "Uncertain, confused, I tried to pull away, but his kiss grew more urgent and all at once I didn't want to move away any more. I pulled him closer to me. … And then, it was as if we'd both caught fire. Sort of like spontaneous combustion and we were burning up together" (382).

The fact that it also takes place within a context in which Sephy's freedom is violated could, nonetheless, prompt readers to identify it as a disturbing narrative of rape. Even if it were to be understood in those terms, this should be decodified as a recurrent trope in the genre of romance fiction and, as Angela Toscano has argued, it could be explored and examined strictly taking into consideration its narratological function and leaving aside its sociological, cultural and psychological significance: "the narrative purpose of rape in popular romance is to serve, simultaneously, as bond and as obstacle, as the barrier and the attraction between hero and heroine. Like the violent piercing of Cupid's arrows, rape serves as the external and fated event that brings the lovers together" (Toscano n.p.). Within the context of the novel, Sephy and Callum's sexual intercourse unites them as never before – their encounter results in the birth of their daughter – and, at the same time, it is the catalyst that distances them forever – Callum will be executed for his actions, which are considered rape by Sephy's father and the ruling hegemonic discourse he represents as a government minister. The novel ends with the announcement of the birth of Callie Rose McGregor: "At midnight on 14th May at Mercy Community Hospital, to Persephone Hadley and Callum McGregor (deceased), a beautiful daughter, Callie Rose. Persephone wishes it to be known that her daughter Callie Rose will be taking her father's name of McGregor" (443). Through this action, Sephy validates her relationship with Callum and shows pride in her mixed-race daughter within a socio-cultural context in which racially and ethnically diverse children are deemed as social outcasts.

The novel, thus, presents a narrative of pride regarding Callie Rose and this offers an empowering depiction for ethnically diverse young adults, which is essential in the development of their identities and their socio-cultural understanding. As Rudine Sims Bishop has argued in her seminal discussion of diversity in children's literature, or lack thereof:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then,

> becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. For many years, non-white readers have too frequently found their search futile (ix).

Sims Bishops goes on to state that if readers: "cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (ibid). For her this is a problematic that does not only affect readers from underrepresented groups but also those from the dominant ones who are deprived of windows onto different realities: "they need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in" (ibid).

Similarly, Sandra Hughes-Hasell states that "[m]ulticultural literature can serve as a vehicle for overcoming the silences and discomfort that prevents open dialogue. As a counter-story, it is nonconfrontational. … It acts as both a mirror – allowing teens of color and indigenous people to reflect on their own experiences – and as a window, providing the opportunity for white teens to view the experiences of others" (221). Blackman's series is a case in point in this respect, since it does not only serve as a window onto the lives of teenagers of different ethnic and class backgrounds but is also a mirror which follows the life of Callie Rose, the heroine of the third novel in the series. Moreover, it offers those openings and reflections at the same time that it portrays institutionalized racism and "demonstrates how the worst effects of racism may not be the big injustices, but rather the daily instances of bias, individually insignificant but incessant, and cumulative, that wear people down and waste lives" (Reynolds 57). The focus on precisely those negative effects of racism and social injustices in the lives of Sephy, Jude and Callie Rose continues in the second and third novel where the initial plotline of *Noughts and Crosses* is expanded to accommodate cross-cutting issues such as gender violence and oppressive social pressures for young women.

The second novel in the series, *Knife Edge*, revolves around the lives of Jude and Sephy after Callum's death. Sephy is depicted as a single teenage mother who is determined to honour Callum's memory and raise their mixed-race daughter Callie Rose in a society that undoubtedly will oppress her: "For you I would die. But more scary [sic] than that, for you I would kill. In a second. I know it as surely as I know my own name. I won't let anyone hurt you" (39). Nonetheless, the novel overcomes such a simplistic and romanticised view of maternal love and goes on to show the ways in which Sephy

struggles to come to terms with her maternity and eventually develops a postnatal depression: “new mothers aren’t supposed to feel *nothing*” (20; emphasis in the original). Blackman’s narrative presents Sephy’s life in parallel to that of Jude, who continues to unleash his anger against crosses and remains a member of the LM, albeit an inoperative one. The novel delves into the topic of gender violence by presenting Jude’s murder of Cara, a young cross who establishes a love relation with Jude. At the turning point in the narrative the lives of Sephy and Jude become entwined when she provides him with a false alibi: “We’ll tell them we wanted to put aside our differences and work together to clear your brother’s name. We could say we’d both agreed I should meet you at Cara’s. You introduced us but you and I both left almost immediately after that” (311). Although this narrative twist is very problematic from an ethical perspective as Sephy protects a murderer, it is justified as a caring gesture towards Meggie, whose sanity depends on the wellbeing of her only remaining son. I argue that by presenting a less than perfect character, Blackman transcends the burden of representation and the tendency to create only positive portrayals that is common when previously under-published groups gain access to the literary circuit. This should be read as a sign of a more mature literature which is able to depict diversity with greater confidence and which “includes characters who are both strong and weak, who make both good and bad decisions, who demonstrate both right and wrongs. … Authenticity and goodness do not go hand in hand” (Dresang 24). It also is indicative of the ways in which Blackman’s novel departs from Laura Atkins’ previously mentioned view of the series as restrictive in the types of voices and stories presented (n.p.).

Checkmate, the third novel, partakes of this agenda of creating diverse role models by centering the narrative on Callie Rose’s growing up process, which is marked by internal family conflicts and external social hostility. Blackman explains:

> The book is called Checkmate [sic] because I wanted to have a number of confrontations taking place – the two major ones are between Jude (Callum’s brother) and Jasmine (Sephy’s mum) and between Sephy and her daughter, Callie Rose. I wanted a sense of tactics and strategy and final chances in these confrontations. And I thought Checkmate would sum up the fact that once the game has been played there would be winners and losers and a time to reflect and learn and hopefully move forward. (“A book of Hope” n.p.)

Indeed, the novel presents a sixteen-year-old young adult heroine who struggles to locate a sense of self against a social backdrop of racism and bigotry. For Sandra Hughes-Hasell "for teens of color and for indigenous teens, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of racial and ethnic identity formation" (218) and this process is integral to Sephy's identity search, which is further complicated by the lack of information she has about her father's life and her mixed heritage. In *Checkmate*, Sephy's search for answers leads her to uncover the official truth about her dad's life, which is a distorted version of reality:

> These are the things I know for sure: My name is Callie Rose. No surname. I am sixteen years old today. Happy birthday to me. My mum is Persephone Hadley, daughter of Kamal Hadley. Kamal Hadley is the leader of the Opposition – and a complete bastard. My mum is a Cross – one of the so-called ruling elite. My dad was Callum Ryan McGregor. My dad was a Nought. My dad was a murderer. My dad was a rapist. My dad was a terrorist. My dad burns in hell. Every time my mum looks at me, she wishes with all her heart my dad had lived – and I hadn't (19).

This passage, which occurs in the novel's opening pages, reveals a heroine who feels ashamed of her origins and an unresolved anger towards her mother. Callie feels alienated from her immediate family and her social surroundings where she has too often heard people refer to her as "a halfer"[5]. Callie's uncle, Jude, who is now the general in command of the LM, takes advantage of her vulnerability to culminate his revenge against Sephy by poisoning Callie's mind in order to convince her to become a suicide bomber for the LM. Deliberately, Sephy's mother Jasmine rescues Callie from this fate by locking her and Sephy up in her house cellar, in the hope that by forcing mother and daughter to share the same space they can have a conversation that mends the bridges between them: "Were we never going to get out of this ruddy cellar? … I still had so many questions for Mum. Nana Jasmine was right. There were things that only she could answer" (499). Jasmine

[5] The first time Callie Rose asks her mum about the meaning of the term "halfer" Sephy explains to her the following: "You listen to me, Callie Rose Hadley, you're not "half" anything. D'you understand me? You're wholly you. Half implies short measures or a fraction of something. You haven't got half a tongue or half a brain" (107). This reference is reminiscent of Black British John Agard's ironic poem against racism and prejudice entitled "Half-Caste". This poem is included in the GCSE English syllabus and, thus, well-known by secondary students in Britain. Agard's poem includes the following lines: "Explain yuself/wha yu mean/ when yu say half-caste/ … Explain yuself/wha yu mean/Ah listening to you wid de keen/ half of mih ear/ Ah looking at yu wid de keen half of mih eye/ an when I'm introduced to yu/I'm sure you'll understand/why I offer you half-a-hand" (2004)

sacrifices her own life in the process, by setting off the bomb Callie has made, well aware that her breast cancer delivered her death sentence anyway: "It's hard like a marble, irregular in shape, not spherical, bigger than before and painful. The lump in my breast is back" (241).

Checkmate thus sets out to resolve the confrontations between the main characters in the series. Some of these resolutions involve death but all of them are deeply rooted in love; not only in the romantic love that Sephy and Callum profess for each other as two young lovers, but also in the maternal love that Jasmine displays for Sephy and that Sephy, in turn, feels for Callie. As Blackman states in the *Checkmate* question and answer section of her official website: "The trilogy started off with love, I felt it should end the same way". Such a strong message about the significance of love within a context of social oppression is reminiscent of bell hooks' conception of love as a tool for socio-political change: "without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning from an ethic of domination" (hooks 289). Blackman's series similarly places hope in the teaching of an ethics of love to the future generation of YA novel readers regardless of their ethnicity

Blackman, thus, makes an ethico-political use of the genre of YA romance, to produce a narrative that has ideological content as it challenges our perceptions of race, power, truth and gendered identities. Louisa Peacock has stated that "through her writing, Blackman has helped to reveal the injustice and prejudices in modern Britain in a way that can relate to both black and white people" (n.p.). Nevertheless, Blackman purposely makes reference also to historical events that resonate with various socio-political settings such as: South Africa under apartheid, America during the Civil Rights Movement, or Ireland at the height of the IRA in the 1970s and 1980s, which is denoted in the novel in the representation of the Liberation Militia. Echoes of the Civil Rights Movement are particularly evident in the name of the leader, unmistakable Martin Luther King, and the reference to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963:

> "EQUAL RIGHTS FOR BLACKS AND WHITES! EQUAL RIGHTS FOR BLACKS AND WHITES!" We were marching towards the Houses of Parliament. Alex Luther, the Nought leader of the Coalition for Rights and Equality, had given an inspirational speech at the beginning of our march and now he was leading the

> huge crowd of Noughts and Crosses, united in one common chant (*Checkmate* 383).

Likewise, the rejection and violence Callum encounters on his first day at formerly cross-only Heathcroft High School is reminiscent of that faced by the group of nine black students, known as the Little Rock Nine, who had to be escorted into school by federal troops in Arkansas in September 1957: "'NO BLANKERS IN OUR SCHOOL. NO BLANKERS IN OUR SCHOOL.' The slogan was shouted out over and over again. Callum and three other noughts were surrounded by police officers who were trying to push their way through the crowd to get to the school entrance" (*Noughts and* Crosses 54).

Although such passages foreground crucial anti-racist movements, "it's remarkable how the story also speaks to people who have been divided on other than racial grounds", as Dominic Cooke, who adapted the novel for the stage, argues (*Royal Shakespeare Company* n.p.). It is precisely the novels' reverberation to large-scale forms of discrimination, injustice and oppression which allows readers from different socio-historical backgrounds to identify with the protagonists on various levels and handpick their own specific socio-historical context in which to imaginatively ground the narrative's dystopic setting. As Blackman herself has commented in an interview with Alison Flood:

> "I've had a number of letters from Ireland where people are saying 'you're talking about the Protestant/Catholic situation, aren't you?' Obviously people get what is relevant to their own life from it. I've had a couple from different people in Spain saying 'are you talking about the situation with the Separatists', and from Israel saying 'are you talking about the Palestine situation?' It's really interesting to me, because I kind of thought it was obvious I was doing the black and white thing - but that said, I mention colour very, very rarely" (Flood "Malorie Blackman: Developing Negatives" n.p.)

The first three novels in the series continuously bring to light gaps in Western historiography by making explicit references to African-American scientists, inventors and pioneers, as Blackman points out in the Author's note at the end of the first book in the series: "[they] are all real people and their achievements are very real. When I was at

school, we didn't learn about any of them – except Robert Peary, the white European-American explorer. I wish we had done. But then, if we had, maybe I wouldn't have written this book…[sic]" (*Noughts and Crosses* 444).

Previous scholar research on Blackman's work has identified primarily questions of violence and racial discrimination as the backbone of the series. According to Christine Wilkie-Stibbs: "in the punitive and corrupt state bureaucracy and petty politics at work in Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* trilogy … we see how the institutionalized modes of violence and the kinds that are structurally inherent in neoliberalism produce their effects" (127), for Fiona McCulloch "Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* (2001-06) trilogy engages with bleak contemporary issues like gang culture and racism" (43), Melanie Ramdarshan Bold states that "[Malorie Blackman] did not write about issues of 'race' and racism until she published her *Noughts and Crosses* series in 2001" (116) and Lucy Pearson adds to the generic debate surrounding Blackman's work by describing the series as science fiction: "Malorie Blackman has explored issues of race in her popular science fiction series beginning with *Noughts and Crosses*" (175). Nonetheless, not much has been written about Blackman's engagement with gender issues, and in my opinion this is also a key issue in Blackman's agenda to right wrongs.

The first three novels in the series pay special attention to topics that are of utmost importance to young adult women, in particular: teenage pregnancy, post-natal depression, oversexualization of female bodies, oppressive beauty standards for young women and gender violence. I consider this inclusion as another generic innovation and a challenge to critical approaches that consider YA romance as a means of "reinforce[ing] a particular version of commercialized, heterosexual femininity" (Johnson 55), "promoting consumption as a means to beauty, popularity, and romance for young women" (ibid) and "focus[ing] strongly on the heroine's appearance" (Johnson 58). Blackman's novels do the opposite: they depict strong, intelligent, confident and resourceful black women who resist the patriarchal matrix and bring to the foreground gender concerns related to women's oppression and the representation and treatment of women's bodies. In this respect, Sephy's doomed-to-failure love story with Callum does not lead to the destruction of the heroine as in Shakespeare's original play. On the contrary, Sephy both literally and emotionally survives Callum's death. Rather than accepting her dad's blackmail to have an abortion, she decides to go on with her pregnancy: "If I had an abortion I'd be saving Callum's life. He wouldn't spend the rest

of his life in jail, either" (*Noughts and Crosses* 430), and becomes what can be referred to as a "non-Juliet".

Sephy claims control over her own body, against her family's will, refuses to terminate her pregnancy, rejects her mother's financial help and moves in with Callum's mother, earns a living by singing and composing songs, does not mourn Callum's death endlessly and is determined to fight her post-natal depression. In short, she is depicted as a resilient, determined young woman. Furthermore, Blackman does not present a rose-tinted narrative about maternity, which helps to demystify oppressive culturally constructed expectations. Sephy struggles to come to terms with her life after Callie Rose is born: "I realized in that moment just how much I didn't know about you, Callie, or any baby. You weren't a romantic ideal or some stick to beat my dad with. You're a real person. Someone who had to rely on me for everything. And God, I've never felt so scared" (*Knife Edge* 21). After her post-natal depression, it takes her time to establish an emotional relationship with her own daughter and become an agent of her own emotions rather than a predictably conventional heroine besotted with a hero.

More significantly, Blackman portrays a character, Sephy, who is able to deconstruct the hegemonic discourse of romantic love, which in the Western discursive tradition has been codified as an "intense attraction that involves the idealization of the other, within an erotic context, with the expectation of enduring for some time into the future" (Jankowiak 150) Sephy, by contrast, passes onto her daughter a stimulating and enriching view of love and love relations:

> Ah, Callie, your dad will always have a special place in my heart. A place that will always be his and no one else's. But it's unrealistic to think that there's only one person in this world whom any of us can love. … Callum and I were like a fire that couldn't burnt itself out. We were all-consuming passion and intense emotions. … Nathan and I understand each other. It's not all fiery passion, but it's caring and sharing and comfortable. … I don't mean it's boring. It's not. But we share the same sense of humour and the same values and I like him very much. It's very important to like the one you're with as well as love them, Callie Rose. Don't forget that (*Checkmate* 506)

The series depicts a genealogy of strong and resourceful black women and Blackman puts hope for a better future in Sephy's daughter: "You're new and unique and

original. You’re a lighter brown than me. Much lighter. But you’re not a Nought, nor white like your dad. You’re a trailblazer. Setting your own colour, your own look. Maybe you’re the hope for the future. Something new and different and special” (*Knife Edge* 37-38). Callie Rose at the age of thirteen displays characteristics that are at odds with views of YA romance’s portrayal of young female adults as mere passive consumers of highly patriarchal values and beliefs; even if it alienates Callie Rose from her own friends:

> My friends were getting really fed up with me. Rafiya, Audra and Sammi, my best friends I [Callie Rose] wasn’t into the same things as them any more. I didn’t read teenage magazines about make-up and boys. I didn’t believe soppy love stories where the woman met Mr Right, had an orgasm, got married and lived happily ever after. What a load of crap! (*Checkmate* 315)

This quotation is a clear example of the ways in which Blackman’s series can be analyzed as a pertinent example of feminist and ethically-committed re-writing and re-righting of YA romance fiction which does not promote sexism and gender stereotyping. Instead, it incorporates feminist concerns and displays, as Roberta Seelinger Trites has argued, how “the twenty-first century has, therefore, been a remarkably productive time for feminist studies in children’s and adolescent literary studies, especially in the ways that feminism has pushed the boundaries of the field into explorations of nuanced reading of gender, sex, and sexuality within cultural contexts” (xvi). All in all, the first three novels in the series transcend the unequal gender relations that are too often present in YA romance literature, in which women are all too frequently presented as dominated by men who at times hurt them, since Blackman offers alternative role models for young female adults.

Conclusion

All in all, Blackman’s YA Noughts and Crosses series challenges strict generic categorization. The first three novels in the series combine some conventions of the popular genres of romance with elements of YA literature with the aim of creating ethically and politically committed narratives that make a young readership reflect upon social injustices, racism, the social construction of romantic love and gender violence. Thus, Blackman’s novels do more than trespass the colour line in the genres of YA fiction

and romance – both genres have traditionally failed to reflect diversity both in terms of authors and characters–,[6]they also introduce generic innovations to adapt them to Blackman's own agenda as a writer. In this respect, I consider that Blackman's novels *Noughts & Crosses*, *Knife Edge* and *Checkmate* are examples of YA romances which transgress the allegedly formulaic and merely escapist view of both genres with the aim of teaching readers about racial oppression in a non-context specific location and introducing alternative and empowering female roles for young readers that do not unquestionably comply with hegemonic discourses about love.

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[6] Critics have pointed out this lack of racial diversity as well as recent attempts to overcome it (Teo, 2018; Moody-Freemand 2020), Harlequin Kimani Romance series, which features African-American and multicultural characters, is a noticeable exception.

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