

Sexuality Today: Contemporary African American Women Writers' Chick Lit Novels

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Abstract

*Firstly the paper explains how sexism and racism have been intertwined for African Americans, as well as taking into consideration the resulting importance of gender and class-specific approaches even today. Secondly, the paper deals with how hidden power relations operate in the third millennium from the viewpoint of sexuality, as depicted in the case of the major characters in two selected books, namely *What a Sista Should Do* (2005) by Tiffany L. Warren and *The Other Side of the Game* (2005) by Anita Doreen Diggs, which represent two distinct subgenres of chick lit.*

Keywords: Black, sexual politics, gender, sexuality, contemporary African American women writers, chick lit, Sista lit, Christian lit, sisterhood, romance

It would be naïve to think that power relations that elevate some groups over others do not exist. For African Americans of both genders much has changed and much has been achieved since the civil rights movement, but still – as for instance Patricia Hill Collins notes – “the power relations that administer the theatre of America are now far more hidden” in the post-civil rights era (4). To accept that racism still exists in some form means an important challenge both for white Americans and (mainly) for African Americans.¹ In particular, despite the social mobility of many African Americans and the better visibility of African Americans in higher social positions, some violations against black men and women still continue to occur (Collins 5).² What is more, African Americans often still seem to be alienated and disconnected from other black people – especially in their attempts and aspirations to live in middle-class white neighbourhoods – and also from themselves (cf. Collins 5–6).

Throughout this paper, the theoretical framework of intersectionality is used (as explained by Collins). Intersectional paradigms understand race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and sexuality as a mutually constructing system of power which penetrates all social relations (Collins 11).³ As Collins observes, “[i]n the post-civil right era, gender has emerged as a prominent feature of what some call a ‘new’ racism” (5). Simultaneously, and ironically, many African Americans deny the existence of sexism, as the more obvious and pressing problem of racism has been solved. But it is vital to realize that – due to the fact that sexism and racism are intertwined – racism simply “cannot be solved without seeing and challenging sexism,” as Collins suggests. There is no doubt that African American people are still affected by racism, but in gender-specific ways (Collins 5).⁴

Before this paper proceeds further, it is necessary to explain its basic standpoints. Assuming that the chick lit novel⁵ is one of the most successful (but usually also underestimated) genres⁶, one which tends to some extent to romanticize sex and sexuality,⁷ it is intriguing to ask how contemporary popular African American women writers deal with sexuality as well as racial tensions, as suggested by Collins and other black feminist critics.⁸ In addition, it becomes vital to consider whether contemporary African American women writers feel an urge to cope with racial issues and tensions related to female sexuality,⁹ and if so, what shape the tensions take. As Andersen suggests, “rather than just adding sexuality” into the analysis, it is necessary to “develop an understanding of how sexuality intersects with race, class, and gender and in ways that go beyond argument by analogy or addition” (447). Two different novels representing various subgenres of chick lit¹⁰ were chosen: Tiffany L. Warren’s *What a Sista Should Do* (which can be classified as Christian chick lit or “church lit”) and Anita Doreen Diggs’ *The Other Side of the Game* (an example of black chick or “Sistah lit”); these terms were suggested by Ferriss and Young (6).

Regardless of race, social status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc. all people face social norms about gender. These norms influence their sense of themselves, the way they perceive femininity and masculinity. In the case of African Americans, the relation between race and gender is even more intensified, and therefore it produces “ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity and femininity” (Collins 6). Consequently, black gender ideology justifies certain behavioural patterns of discrimination and lack of opportunity for both African American men and women, which becomes visible especially in schools, jobs, many social institutions, and/or authorities (Collins 6, 17). In addition, images often presented by contemporary black popular culture and the globalized mass media take the form of representations of black masculinity and femininity, which increasingly influence public life. It becomes rather intriguing to ask whether the presented ideology represents reality or whether it actually shapes it, moulding African American people’s aspirations and the way they perceive themselves within the everyday context. As Collins explains, the tight bond between sexism and racism must be approached as a result of the remaining cultural beliefs concerning the nature of African American sexuality as well as African American sexual practices. As a result, it is obvious that a view of sexuality can hardly be limited to a biological function. From what was outlined above, it is clear that sexuality is also a set of ideas that are deeply rooted in shaping social inequality in America as far as various ethnic groups are concerned (Collins 6). In any event, as Andersen explains, sexuality and gender “exist in a dialectical relationship, just as race and class and gender

are mutually constituted, overlapping, intersecting, and dialectically interrelated to social relations” (447).

Several important observations should be made before proceeding to the analyses. First, as contemporary research proves and Andersen explains, sexuality, “like gender, is a socially constructed identity, not one fixed by nature” (449). Second, in Collins’ opinion, sexuality can be seen as an “entity that is manipulated within each distinctive system of race, class, and gender oppression”. Third, sexuality is a “specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge”. Finally, in general terms, sexuality tends to be perceived as heterosexism, a limiting rigid binary system of oppression similar to racism, sexism, and class oppression (Collins 11–12).¹¹

The repressive nature of sexuality in American society becomes even more obvious when we take into account how extensively visible sexuality has become – Collins terms it hypervisibility (36) – in combination with the fact that even nowadays a wide range of sexual practices are censored or at least frowned upon. These include for instance gay and lesbian “closeting” accompanied by sexuality discussed only within the margins of heterosexual marriage as well as interracial sexual activities, procreation stressed as a fundamental purpose of sexuality, or silence when it comes to information concerning other forms of birth control before marriage but abstinence (Collins 37–38). On the one hand, sex and the notion of lust sell, and therefore sexual spectacles are highly visible in American (as well as other countries’) media;¹² on the other hand, sexuality fails to be understood as a natural but complex part of human life. A real understanding of sexuality as an essential experience in people’s lives has hardly been reached. As a result, as is pointed out by Collins, it is rather difficult to have frank, open, and public debates about sexuality which would be somehow constructive and would reflect reality. Sexuality itself then becomes perceived as a taboo or some sort of problem, and can even be demonized. Not to mention that studying sexual practices which do not fit into the prevailing heterosexist norms becomes rather problematic, for such activities stigmatize individuals as well as groups who engage in alternative sexual practices (Collins 37–38). What is more, this normative system leads to a certain reluctance to talk about human sexuality as far as education is concerned. Young people may lack information about birth control, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases, and are therefore at risk (cf. Collins 38–39).

For centuries, as Collins points out, both African American men and women were associated with an imagined animalistic, “wild” and therefore dangerous sexuality based on their racial difference and the concept of the Other by Western society.¹³ In particular, black men were labelled as dangerous and violent sexual beings, while black women were perceived as frivolous. Such associations reinforced racial differences and further fuelled the imagery of untamed and, above all, hypersexualized men and women of African descent. According to Collins, invoked sexual meanings gradually gave shape to racism, sexism, class exploitation, and heterosexism (27).

In addition, today the historical context of presupposed African American untamed sexuality is not taken into consideration. Although present-day sexual images of African Americans are more sophisticated, they remain limiting and tend to view African Americans as hypersexualized by their very nature. The funky and dirty sexual practices associated with this ethnic group make their sexuality even more intriguing, and may continue to result in myths around black sexual practices (cf. Collins 42).

In order to prevent American society from returning to such simplifying tendencies and reinforcing the new sexism and racism, there is an essential need for a continuous black sexual politics. Sexual politics has to do with the placement of particular groups at the particular intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. It can be defined as “a set of ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame all men and women’s treatment of one another, as well as how individual men and women are perceived and treated by others” (Collins 6).

It is vital to point out that African Americans consider sex and gender relations to be a private concern. Trying not to “air the dirty Black linen” in public (Guy-Sheftall 301)¹⁴ leads people to observe the normativity of heterosexism, and problems remain hidden. The church, similarly to major African American social and other organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and so on, bases its teachings around the patriarchal black nuclear family, which does not contribute to undermining a sexually repressive culture either (Collins 45).

To sum up, heterosexism mostly remains as a system of labelling what is considered to be normal and therefore acceptable; it operates as a set of ideas or assumptions which form a normative “taken-for-granted ideology” (Collins 37). There has always existed a need for a progressive black sexual politics; however, today, the need to take a gender-specific approach is even more obvious in order to explain African American men and women’s realities. Sex education and open discussion of human sexuality must not be suppressed in the sex-saturated society (Collins 38).

The first novel analyzed in the paper is *What a Sista¹⁵ Should Do* by Tiffany L. Warren. The book centres on three African American women belonging to the same church, narrated by each of them in the first person in alternating chapters.¹⁶ Unlike in other chick lit books – and especially “Sistah lit” genres – their real friendship remains undeveloped throughout the book. The women struggle to live good and meaningful lives in balance with their faith and relationships.

A brief outline of the plot and description of the three major protagonists should shed some light on the way sexuality is dealt with in the book. Pam Lyons is an African American professional woman who – out of necessity, though – has carried the financial burden of the whole household due to her husband’s inability to fulfil his dreams. Simultaneously, she takes care of their two small daughters. She compensates for her dissatisfaction with her family and personal life by centring her life on God and the New Faith Church, which further frustrates her husband Troy. Their growing apart is only solved by her becoming pregnant again and his ultimate acceptance of her faith. Wondering where their future lies, Pam learns to love both her partner and God, which is her greatest achievement. The second major character is Taylor Johnson, the single mother of Joshua, who is the result of an affair she had with Luke Hastings – who also happens to be the minister of the Church and is married to Yvonne, the last major character. Yvonne Hastings thinks she has a perfect (but childless) life, not being aware of the fact that her husband has been unfaithful for years (not only with Taylor) and has also been leading a parallel life with another woman with whom he has an adult daughter. When she learns about Taylor’s child and who the father is, Yvonne aims her hatred at Taylor and initially believes her husband’s lies about his affair. Only after Luke attacks his wife so violently that he nearly kills her does she find the strength to face the truth and leave him.

The novel is to be read as an example of a Christian chick lit (or “church lit” as suggested by Ferriss and Young) novel in which the depiction of sexuality plays a seemingly minor part in comparison with its strongly accentuated religious message. The opposite, however, is the case: as a matter of fact, sex is not totally suppressed or even ignored, but it becomes a taboo subject. While Taylor is silenced by his threats, Luke, the respected and respectable minister of the Church, is unable to take responsibility for the consequences of his affair. The seeming absence of sexuality as far as the everyday protagonists’ lives are concerned precisely shows the restrictive and hypocritical attitude of the African American church to the sexuality of its members.

To sum up the initial discussion of this particular novel, sexuality in the novel *What a Sista Should Do* is limited to basically four views. First, sexuality is viewed an essential part of marital duties within a Christian marriage. There is a question, however, whether to view sexuality as a source of carnal pleasure or simply as a part of procreation (as stated in the Bible). If the latter view is taken, then Yvonne – who apparently cannot bear children – and Luke’s sexual practices definitely become more than just a fulfilment of their marital duties. Yvonne’s blind obedience to her husband as well as her negation of her own sexuality become obvious from the following words: “And in the bedroom – well, let’s just say that I ain’t never had a headache. ... I know my husband gets everything he needs at home. I’m not bragging either. It just what I know” (20).

Second, sexuality might take a form of indulging oneself but it is never referred to in an explicit way or in terms of carnal pleasure in the book. Taylor and Luke see each other regularly for this purpose before her attention is drawn to her pregnancy, and her attachment to him is immediately destroyed by his urgent request to undergo an abortion. The only allusion to sex as a pleasurable part of a woman’s life is when Taylor’s mother, “being her carnal self, had the nerve to ask [her] if [she is] gay or something” (235) when she expresses her concern about her daughter’s sexual passivity. The mother is simply worried about her daughter’s wellbeing – which, in her opinion, is related to finding herself a man. Taylor’s prudish reaction reveals how fanatical and narrow-minded one of the protagonists has become: “... that one little comment got me longing for a warm body in my bed. That’s how easy the devil can steal my focus. I need to hurry up and figure out what God has for me to do” (235). At the same time, if sex does not go hand-in-hand with love, as is the case with several men Taylor has dated, it becomes a source of frustration and hopelessness. Taylor contemplates her life: ““One day we’re going to have our own family,’ I believed him. He had to be telling the truth, or else I was an idiot and this man was just using me for sex. Well, it turns out that I was an idiot” (11).

Third, sexuality is perceived as a source of sin. Only after the woman sinner is judged and punished (often by the members of the “Sister to Sister” community operating within the context of the Church) can she be forgiven and redeemed. Taylor compares herself with Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*. Her son Joshua is stigmatized and frowned upon because he was born out of wedlock, which means “that he carries some spirit of lust” (29).

Fourth, in the novel enjoying sex and sexuality as lust is depicted as effectively preventing African American women from finding a partner with serious commitment. Having been hurt by Luke, Taylor is strongly convinced that the only reason why her potential boyfriend Spencer would like to meet and date her is that he wants to have sex with her.

In comparison with other black chick lit novels, Warren's book is not as rich in motifs of racial tensions related to sexual politics. There are essentially three moments in the novel which have a sexual-racial context. The first one is a passage in which Taylor, a single mother, contemplates two notorious themes of African American literature. These are i) her options when, after losing her job, she is advised by a clerk at the Ohio Job and Family Services to apply for emergency benefits, and ii) the high number of imprisoned black men in the American jails. She comments,

Now, I'm not a racist or anything, but it seems real odd that Mrs. Eckhart immediately threw welfare out there as an option. I wonder, if she was looking at a white girl that could have been her daughter or niece, would she be so quick to recommend the poisonous crutch of government money? I'm not too proud to get help, but how about giving me a list of jobs to apply for, or something like that? I think that black women are sometimes steered toward welfare just the way our fathers, husbands and sons often become permanent fixtures in the justice system. (49)

As is the case in other sister-girl novels, in *What a Sista Should Do* Warren attempts to debunk the stereotypes of the welfare queen and the criminal black man.

Next, having been accused of fathering Joshua and having been confronted by Yvonne, Luke leaves threatening messages on Taylor's answering machine. One day he even pays her a visit and expresses his fury: "Oh, you done put the white man in our business," referring to the American courts, which from his point of view represents a sort of betrayal (77). Finally, Taylor addresses another infamous and frequently discussed issue – the competitive nature of the relationship between black and white women. Watching her superior Glenda at work interact with a man she herself might be interested in, she utters, "I can't stand the way some white women get around fine black men. It's sickening." Her following words show how critical of men she is in general. She continues, "[b]ut the brothers love that ego-building attention. I think that's the real reason why some of them are crossing over" (91).

The second analyzed book is *The Other Side of the Game* by Anita Doreen Diggs. In comparison with the previous novel, this book pays much more attention to issues of love of various kinds, and sex is often explicitly displayed or discussed as a strong motif with considerable variety; this can generally be said about numerous "Sistah lit" novels.¹⁷ Similarly to *What a Sista Should Do* as well as other books of the chick lit genre, the individual chapters take their names from the corresponding first person narrators who follow each another in a largely regular pattern. What is more interesting, despite the fact that the novel is a women-centred text, Diggs provides her readers with a completely different perspective, using a male voice as one of those telling the story. Subsequently, the novel becomes not simply more complex, but also more multi-layered and therefore also more convincing.

Saundra Patterson and Asha Mitchell are half-sisters who live very different lives. Saundra is a yoga-practicing vegan who cannot imagine her life without her father Phillip (or Phil, the male narrator mentioned above), as she has lived with him since her mother Lola's death. Together with her sister, she is preparing happily for Saundra's upcoming nuptials. By contrast, materialistic Asha, an accessories buyer at Macy's, simultaneously

engages in various relationships in order to be able to afford designer clothes and her fancy apartment. She believes that men can only be a part of her life sexually and financially, having “no intention of settling down or ever being faithful to any one man” (14), whereas Sandra and her high school sweetheart Yero live a holistic lifestyle and support each other’s dreams. Phil is a police detective who has lived with a terrible secret since he was in the first grade. He has been dating Evelyn, his colleague from the same precinct who helped him to raise Sandra for six years, but always has an excuse for postponing their engagement. When Sandra discovers her father’s secret (he is gay), it affects the relationship she has with the two most important men in her life, Phil and her fiancé. Sandra flees to the only safe place she has at the moment, Asha’s apartment, which reveals how different the sisters are. At the end of the novel, there is a happy reunion at Sandra and Yero’s wedding in which all the characters except Evelyn participate.

The Other Side of the Game offers a much more varied and complex way of depicting sexuality. Sexuality and sexual practices are never referred to as duties but mostly as sources of pleasure and even spiritual growth, as in the case of Sandra and her gentle but passionate husband-to-be. Fundamentally, the novel focuses on the sensual aspect of love-making. Simultaneously, unfulfilled longing for sex turns into a source of frustration; Evelyn comments about her boyfriend at her birthday party: “Sometimes, he takes the abstaining from sex thing too far. Tonight is an example. There are certain days of the year that no woman should have to ask for what she needs” (56).

As discussed previously, unapproved sexual activity by a child can become a reason for turning him/her into an outcast of a family. Joanne, Yero’s brother’s girlfriend, is thrown out by her strict Haitian family even though she miscarries. Phil’s secret of being sexually attracted to other boys results in his father’s threat not to “ever set a foot on his property again” (227) and his mother’s constant rejection of any attempt Phil makes to contact his parents.

The female body is also depicted as a trap and source of trickery, anxiety, and humiliation. Asha’s teenage adventure with the most attractive but ruthless peer she could choose ends up in her pregnancy and subsequent painful abortion at the age of sixteen. To make things worse, Asha becomes “the subject of a major scandal and the ridicule [is] tearing [her] apart” (13). It is this experience that later turns the protagonist of the “Sistah lit” novel into a promiscuous man-hunter. Yero describes her as follows: “I don’t dislike her. But if Asha liked herself, she wouldn’t be hitting the sheets with every man that crosses her path” (203). Asha uses her body as a strategic weapon, effectively creating a feeling of power and control over men. This attitude is rooted in her inability to become emotionally attached to any man, an emotional issue she herself calls “a commitment phobia”. Having overcome her fear of being Nick’s woman, “something owned. Someone who [is] going to be betrayed” (300), she is the character who experiences the largest emotional and psychological growth, metamorphosing herself into a much more balanced person.

Evelyn joins the other numerous African American women characters who are forced to face the lack of eligible men of the same colour. She explains her complicated relationship with Phil, “[b]ut what would have been the point of leaving him? It’s not like there’s a surplus of African-American men who don’t mind being in a relationship with a woman who carries a pistol and studies Eastern philosophy” (156).

As a matter of fact, Asha is not the only character afraid of commitment. Nick brings a very frank insight into the difference between a wife and a “wifey”, who is “just a girlfriend you like a lot and you don’t want her to go out there fuckin’ around, so you give her a title and she sticks around forever and ever. . . . It’s an insurance policy for a brother who has no intention of actually making any real commitment to his girlfriend but has decided he doesn’t want her messing around with other people while he does whatever he wants.” Asha is astounded: “What kind of sorry-ass woman would agree to an arrangement like that?” Nick’s answer is “The kind that’s in love” (216–217). When Asha discovers Brent has never loved his white wife, because he “just liked how she looked on [his] arm,” but never “stopped loving the sisters,” Asha respects him even less than before, correcting him immediately, “No, you mean you never stopped *fucking* the sisters” (278).

Phil and Evelyn’s relationship has lasted nearly for six years. Except for her frustration resulting from the lack of intimacy and sex with her boyfriend, as well as his reluctance to propose to her, paradoxically enough Evelyn finds herself happy with Phil. She states that she does not “have to beg him to take [her] out or buy [her] a thoughtful gift”. All in all, in her opinion, he “is a wonderful boyfriend” (35), despite the fact that “sometimes, he takes the abstaining from sex thing too far” (156). The two make a deal that as soon as Sandra moves out of the house, “it would be [her] time.” Evelyn agrees “to wait for him to handle his business with his daughter,” being “happy with the way things are” (37). However, her statement “that’s that. Or it should be” plants a seed of doubt for an observant reader. What keeps her motivated to be patient is her feeling that “Phil is one of the last good men left,” and she does not intend to lose him by listening to those who doubt their relationship (37). In addition, Evelyn has been married before when she was very young, and the marriage turned out not to function at all. Gradually – despite her trying not to push him just because she has already been waiting for so long – more characters than just Evelyn speculate about the reasons why Phil has not proposed to her yet. Evelyn is constantly reminded of the fact that she still has not been bought an engagement ring by her mother¹⁸ but mainly by her best friend Josephine.¹⁹ However, it crosses no-one’s mind that Phil might be gay. Even when Evelyn confronts him, announcing her wish to have an engagement ring, he lulls her with the same excuse of “march[ing] his daughter down the aisle first” (74).

Finally, in connection with sexuality, Diggs does not avoid the rather sensitive topic of racism within the black American community. Joanne is automatically expected by her Haitian family to “be a lawyer, marry a Haitian man from a good family and live happily ever after.” When she announces she is in love with Yero, an African American man of Jamaican origin, the parents say they “want nothing to do with her”. This incident brings back Sandra’s high school memories of the “stupid ‘Island Wars’” and what Phil taught her about narrow-mindedness within the black community: “we are all black people who may have come on different ships but are still in the same boat” (181–182).

I have examined several African American women characters of chick lit novels from the third millennium who were born after the struggles of civil rights and black power; the analysis has focused on the characters’ sexuality. Despite the fact that chick lit and its varieties have tended to be frowned upon, their importance is indisputable for several reasons. First of all, chick lit novels represent publishing’s most lucrative categories, and therefore belong among the best-selling books enjoyed by contemporary women readers. Considering the African American women readers, who make conscious choices of what

books they want to read as well as do not want to read, an important phenomenon should be referred to. As was mentioned above, it was Terry McMillan who started a new wave of popularity for the genre with the release of her novel *Waiting to Exhale* and the subsequent movie in the early 1990s, which further encouraged millions of women to read, even across racial boundaries. In addition, McMillan's legacy is cultivated by the so-called "Terry's children", that is younger writers "deliberately extending the urban contemporary mode she developed" (Richards 19).²⁰ It is thanks to McMillan that authors such as Warren or Diggs can engage in an open, frank, and somewhat political discussion with primarily African American readers.

Sexuality is among the most intriguing themes of contemporary chick and "Sistah lit" books. There is no struggling within and against heterosexuality – no "traditionally defined heterosexual women as either mothers or whores" (Willis 233) inhabit the space of the selected novels. Representations of sexuality in them are predominantly heterosexual, with the exception of Phil, one of the protagonists of *The Other Side of the Game*. Still, Diggs' tolerant attitude toward homosexuality prevents her from suggesting that he as well as other male characters could have made husbands for the protagonists if it were not for their sexual orientation.²¹

Yet, there is also a critical perspective: the need for more sharing and consideration when it comes to sex is advocated in both of the selected novels. Treating either gender as sexual objects is not a solution. Naomi Wolf suggests in *The Beauty Myth* that "[w]omen could probably be trained quite easily to see men first as sexual" (154). Nothing could be further from the truth in the case of most of the African American protagonists of the analyzed novels. Neither is the inversion of gendered sexual practice (not objectifying men) of any use, as especially the second novel is based on a value system that feminism originally intended to reject as dehumanizing. On the one hand, the characters of Diggs' novel actively seek pleasure in sex; on the other hand, hand-in-hand with this attitude goes vulnerability: these explorers of the sexual landscape end up emotionally attached to their lovers despite their initial notion that they could avoid such attachment. And it is equally demanding not to succumb fully to what starts as a non-binding flirt, as well as to retain the image of a liberated sex-goddess. All women characters of the analyzed novels are aware of the fact that it is up to them and nobody else to suffer the consequences. Single characters are portrayed as being intrigued by the "normal" life; simultaneously, they often have to try hard to sustain it, or they simply cannot fully relate to it. Kiernan precisely understands this dilemma: "Attempting to invert existent sexual norms in favor of the feminine here seems to risk annihilation. But the possibility of adopting the stereotypically masculine approach to sex ... doesn't signify liberation, rather it seems to suggest a resigned view toward revising feminist sexual politics" (215). The paradoxical fake rhetoric of empowerment, where the sexual subordination of a woman is eroticized, is encountered only occasionally in Asha's behaviour.²²

In general, sex scenes in chick lit are not very extensive or graphic, and "they are narrated matter-of-factly rather than in purple prose, factors that distinguish the genre from pornography, erotica, and romance novels" (Wells 50). In comparison with the selected representative of church lit *What a Sista Should Do*, the second novel analyzed here pays much more attention to issues of love of various kinds, and sex is often explicitly displayed

or discussed as a strong motif with a great variety, which can be generally said about numerous “Sistah lit” novels.

Kiernan sums up the situation effectively, stating that chick lit can be seen as “a relatively new form of romance” and claiming that it “offers a more sophisticated insight into the lives, loves, and aspirations of the women it speaks for and to: ‘anticipating pleasure’ has largely been superseded by actively seeking and experiencing pleasure. And sex... has heralded a new phase of women’s fiction – one that raises questions about how feminine desire is constructed, articulated, and received beyond fiction” (208). It is tempting to expect that in such an atmosphere a feminist triumph is signalled; still, however, the protagonists cannot have it all, as their thirst for independence is often at odds with their occasional wanting of a “knight in a shining armour”. By giving her female protagonist a number of sexual partners and experiences, Diggs lets the story of the women’s growth and experiences “stand on [their] own, rather than simply making it part of a larger romantic narrative” (Mabry 202). Moreover, these more experienced heroines “are also easier for their intended readers to relate to, as it is not only accepted but also accepted in contemporary culture that young women will have had at least some sexual experience before settling into a serious long-term relationship or marriage” (Mabry 202).

Suppressed sexuality, as presented in *What a Sista Should Do* and demonstrated in the analysis, has rather serious consequences; by contrast, most of the characters in *The Other Side of the Game* – similarly to many other real women of their generation – consider the search for sexual fulfilment to be what Richards terms as a “valid human endeavour” (Richards 118). Obviously, Terry McMillan’s heritage in subsequent black popular novels for women lies not only in the formal (mainly narrative) innovations, but also in the fact that in *Waiting to Exhale* she “struck a chord similar to that of other forms of popular women’s fiction, such as romance novels, which also invite women readers into a dialogue about new roles women can play in intimate relationships,” which women readers consider to be vitally important, the reason being the changing mores that have “radically altered the way men and women try to relate to each other in romantic partnership” (Richards 118).

All in all, criticism directed at the genre of chick lit is often harsh and tends to make conclusions based on a few of its representatives. That is also why this paper took into account two very different examples of what chick lit fiction can offer. *What a Sista Should Do* is a chick lit novel with clear Christian aspirations. Unlike various novels by McMillan or Diggs, in this book African American (and other) women protagonists are often depicted as passive victims, trapped by their bodies within the patriarchal structures; at the same time, African American men become a source of evil, having sexuality at their disposal as a means of controlling and subjugating women. In order to find relief and sanctuary, these women let themselves be “filled with the Spirit of the Lord” (Warren 93). They suppress sexuality and focus their attention on worshipping, wanting “to spend all day every day just basking in His presence” (Warren 93). The impression of seemingly content families in the novel is underlined by its happy ending – Troy’s acceptance of faith and Pam’s giving a birth to a son as well as Yvonne’s newly gained independence from Luke. Only after the women make a decision to act against their partners’ destructive behaviour does something begin to change in the males’ attitude – however, this change comes at a high cost. Warren’s novel reinforces the traditional model of heterosexual marriage and its importance (in the case of Pam and Troy) at first sight; nevertheless, it subversively

shows the absurdity of remaining in a relationship based on lies, obedience, and blind loyalty. Yvonne's divorce provides her with a chance for a new beginning. Neither is Taylor forced to become a part of the happy ending in marriage.

The Other Side of the Game, the second novel analyzed here, represents a more easily recognizable pattern of the happy ending in marriage (Saundra and Yero) as well as in betrothal, a promise of marriage (Asha and Nick).²³ This "Sistah lit" novel does not reinforce heteronormativity, since Phil, a closet homosexual²⁴ and one of the narrators, comes out even though this step is more than likely to undermine his position as an African American police detective. Most of Diggs' protagonists find out how to appreciate themselves, enjoy their bodies, and learn not to expect or hope for a partner – whether male or female – who would answer all their questions.

To conclude, the novels analyzed above challenge both the repressive nature of black female sexuality (historically related to its construction) and the popular (and often demeaning) myths about why women's fiction captivates millions of women readers to various extents. None of the heroines "can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts ... and – nearly – her life" (Modleski 37). The books, especially *The Other Side of the Game*, rather offer dynamic positive characters who make changes only if they suppose that these changes are somehow beneficial for them and also for their loved ones. In *What a Sista Should Do* the usual chick lit critical-subversive stance is suppressed; as a result, it stresses the traditional articulation of morality as inherent in monogamy and motherhood, which are also basic features not only of church lit but also romance novels. Fortunately Warren does so with no reinforcement of the traditional role of women or uncritical insistence on heterosexist family ideology. Friendship and female bonding is something for which the protagonists pay a high price in both books. At the same time, however, – especially in *The Other Side of the Game* – the plotline is fuelled by "wrestling" with "urban material temptations" (Harzewski 4) and values rather than relationships among characters which seem to be reduced to portraying contemporary courtship and social motives – including the position of the protagonist on the marriage market.

The umbrella term of "chick lit" has provoked much controversy in the mainstream press and in the literary world, for the genre's varieties serve not only as commentaries on changing social and demographic phenomena but also as a product of the singles market which expanded in the second half of the 1990s. Whether chick lit is approached as a more realistic parody of the (Harlequin) romance novel,²⁵ as a specific sort of female Bildungsroman, as an evidence of backlash of feminism,²⁶ or as a postfeminist subversive manifesto offering self-reflexive meditations about (and what Harzewski terms as "meta-commentaries" on) the role of the respective communities and commodities (13), it is virtually impossible to ignore the genre's popularity, which goes hand-in-hand with consumer culture. The fact that such novels themselves are written should not elicit anxiety; however, what *is* dangerous is that their readers tend to take to this sentimentalized prose and things presented in it as ideals to aspire to. Also – despite offering a more realistic portrait of single life, several formal innovations, and original use of language, which results in their infectious quality and massive commercial appeal to the audiences – when these novels become perceived as facts representing definitive statements about women's prose

craftsmanship, they perpetuate negative gender stereotypes inflicted both upon African American males and females, and may lead to readers' unrealistic expectations.

Most of the contemporary chick lit novels written by African American women writers only partly compensate for the deficiencies in the real lives of their readers. They are not directed towards female passivity or powerlessness;²⁷ on the contrary, they serve as sources of empowerment, encouraging women readers to realize the potential they have when shaping their lives. By doing so, these novels offer vibrant discussions of the complex topic of sexuality that the prevailing American discourse has been raising in relation to African Americans in the post-civil rights era. In addition, the racial tensions suggested above do occur in contemporary African American romance novels; however, the white element does not stand for any direct threat to the self-supportive African American community, which is capable of functioning and standing by its members of both genders. To be precise, the white presence is limited to those women who represent potential competitors to the African American ones in their quest for finding eligible men.

In other words, the quest for African American progressive sexual politics forms a part of a broader and more global struggle for human rights. Considering the number of people of African descent within US society, they should have their own voice, and their concerns should be discussed on their own terms (Collins 13–14). The first basic prerequisite is to understand that racial and sexual oppression draw strength from each other, and that there still is a tendency to foster black subordination. Gender and sexuality must not be seen from the viewpoint of binary oppositions but rather in terms of variety, individuality, and heterogeneity. Heterosexism and/or any other normative system (sexism, racism, etc.) lead to the classification and marginalization of those who differ from the majority. It is essential to realize that African American people come in all shapes, sizes, political, and religious persuasions, sexual orientations, and so on. It is, therefore, necessary to stop presenting African Americans as a homogenous group regardless of age, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, etc. but to learn to value and appreciate their value as individuals. Finally, as Collins suggests, the politics and infrapolitics as well as the everyday lives of African Americans should respond to challenges of inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, and class (49). Having been given the opportunity to be heard and seen in the media, African Americans themselves are responsible for their reactions to the way they are treated, which – in Collins' opinion – are often rather contradictory (50). There is no urge to submit to “routinized violence” and hypervisible or seemingly empowering sexuality, or to accept labels of untamed wild sexuality. Neither is the solution to embrace the conservative politics of respectability or the repression of sexuality, as was advocated in the past. Instead, as Collins suggests, drawing her ideas from Audre Lorde, the antidote to a gender-specific racial oppression that previously advanced controlling images of deviant black sexuality is for today's African Americans, in the context of new racism, to “rescue and redefine sexuality as a source of power rooted in spirituality, expressiveness, and love” in order to “craft new understandings of black masculinity and black femininity needed for progressive Black sexual politics” (51).

Notes

¹ It would also be possible to apply the terms “black American”, “African-American” or “Afro-American” to people of African ancestry, as the only difference between these expressions seems to lie in their inconsistent use by various critics and scholars around the world. The words “black” nor “white” are not capitalized in this paper; this is not because of lack of respect, but due to the fact that both words merely designate race; in addition, most African American people themselves do not do so either.

² Margaret L. Andersen agrees with Collins, adding that “the emphasis on agency in contemporary feminist scholarship underestimates the role of power in shaping social relations.” In Andersen’s opinion, this error “discounts the significance of class and race (along with other social structural forms of inequality) in shaping the experiences of different groups of women” (443). Andersen too insists on “thinking relationally”, which enables one to “see the social structures that generate both unique group histories and the processes that link them, as well as the processes specific to the social experiences of different groups” (446).

³ The interlocking (often mutually reinforcing) connections among race, class, and gender, as well as how these are manifested in women’s sexuality, is also dealt with by Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill in “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism”, or Zinn et al. in *Gender through the Prisms of Difference*.

⁴ Cf. Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 119–148 and 149–180.

⁵ The term “chick lit” was first used in print by the novelist Cris Mazza, a co-editor of *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995) and *Chick-Lit 2: No Chick Vic* (1996). It is generally agreed that the cornerstones of the genre were laid in 1996 by the publication of the newspaper columns *Sex and the City* by Candace Bushnell in book form as well as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by Helen Fielding. It might be of some interest that it is Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* from 1992 that foreshadows this new trend in women’s prose. Chick lit is often discussed as a sociocultural phenomenon in which playfulness often slips into superficiality; it makes use of not only popular forms (hence the heritage of the romance and Bildungsroman) but also media discourse. For more information about how chick lit draws from romances, see Ferriss and Young 3–5.

⁶ Apparently the genre emerged almost twenty years ago; nevertheless, chick lit has begun to receive academic attention (whether in a positive or negative sense) only in the past ten years, with Imelda Whelehan, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, or Caroline J. Smith as pioneering scholars. As Ferriss and Young point out, acclaimed novelists such as Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing gave its authors the shameful label of “chickerati” (Ferris and Young, ed. 1).

⁷ As a matter of fact, there are other reasons why it is not easy to approach this kind of literature. These include its ambiguous relation to feminism, its fetishization of commodity culture and consumerism, as well as its protagonists’ complicated identities as independent human beings or objects of (mostly hetero-) sexual exchange (Harzewski xvi–xvii).

⁸ Among the black feminist lesbian scholars it is possible to mention, for instance, Gabriele Griffin’s or Evelyn M. Hammond’s work (especially the essay “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence”).

⁹ Chick lit, as a genre which largely embraces the postfeminist doctrine, romanticizes, yet simultaneously ironizes, and therefore also subversively simplifies, not only sexuality but also other depicted phenomena such as single life, social mobility, etc.

¹⁰ For more information about varieties of chick lit, see Ferriss and Young 5–7.

¹¹ For a more detailed account of how heterosexism creates rather harmful binary categories and dichotomizes social groups, see Rosenblum and Travis, *The Meaning of Difference: American*

Constructions of Race, Sex and Gender, Social Class and Sexual Orientation (2000). West analyzes sexuality as an instrument of supporting racial fears and subordination in *Race Matters* (1993).

¹² Seidman offers a discussion of sexuality as commodity in *The Social Construction of Sexuality* (2003).

¹³ Cf. Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 27–35.

¹⁴ A very specific but rather frequently cited expression similar to what Terry McMillan terms as “the right to ‘air our dirty laundry’” in her Introduction to the anthology titled *Breaking Ice* from 1990 (xx).

¹⁵ It is vital to refer to various meanings associated with the word *sister* (and *sista* in the case of African American vernacular language) in this respect. The word denotes a female who has the same parents as another person, but also – more important for this reading – a woman who is a member of the same race, church, religious group, or organization as others. The term may also be used as a form of address to a woman, referring to a woman to whom one has strong feelings of loyalty and friendship (*Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* 1335).

¹⁶ It might be of some interest that this particular way of storytelling was used by Terry McMillan in her breakthrough novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) as well as its sequel *Getting to Happy* (2005). A large number of subsequent chick lit novels by many African American women writers have adhered to this pattern, including the second novel analyzed in this paper. In Ferriss and Young’s opinion, although McMillan remains “the original progenitor of popular black women’s fiction”, most African American chick lit authors owe more to books such as *Sex and the City* and others by non-black authors than *Waiting to Exhale* (8).

¹⁷ As explained above, “Sistah lit” refers to chick lit written by African American authors and is therefore considered as its subgenre.

¹⁸ Evelyn is sceptical of her mother’s advice due to the fact that both “Josephine and Mama need to handle the procrastinators in their own lives” first. In particular she means that Mama and the local butcher have been not only been “flirting with each other for the past ten years”, but also talking about their personal problems, and sharing their dreams. Still, she “can’t get [him] to commit to simply being her boyfriend” (40). Sandra, the first character to learn that her father is not going to ever marry Evelyn, is bewildered by this. Cf. 40, 65–66.

¹⁹ Evelyn makes herself clear in one of the tiresome conversations she and Josephine have on this topic: “Why should I rush this man down the aisle, Josephine? I’ve never been interested in having children. I’m not feeling insecure because I always know where he is, and we’re only going to City Hall when we do tie the knot. We can just jump up and do it anytime.” Josephine, on the other hand, senses “something just isn’t right. . . . he must be one of those commitment-phobic men” who she reads about “in this book called *Men Who Can’t Love*” (37).

²⁰ Another term, namely “members of a ‘New Black Aesthetic’”, which was coined by Trey Ellis in his essay from 1989 (qtd. in Richards 19, or McMillan, *Breaking Ice* xx–xxi), could be referred to in this respect.

²¹ Juliette Wells explains: “these plots are exclusively heterosexual, although a very distant whiff of lesbianism occasionally provides titillation” (59).

²² A more sensitive reader, however, immediately recognizes how naïve her account of the situation is (cf. Diggs 54).

²³ Marriage as a formal feature of every romantic novel (Regis 7) is, by contrast, not typical of chick lit novels in which the unknotting of the plot often takes the form of a mere reunion with the partner, which leaves the novel open for a potential sequel.

²⁴ For more information on the topic of heteronormativity as well as gay and lesbian closeting see Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 87–98.

²⁵ The terms romance and romance novel overlap in their meanings and are consistently used by most critics in such a way, e.g. by Tania Modleski in her book *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* or Barbara Fuchs in *Romance*. “Harlequin romance” refers to probably best-known published novels of romantic fiction.

²⁶ In chick lit feminism is ultimately depicted as an outdated style. It is even “misread as a bilious monolith, its strident tendencies embarrassing and not fully compatible with chick lit’s ties to the values of romance fiction and its embrace of commodities, especially beauty and fashion culture” (Harzewski xxii).

²⁷ These, among others, are viewed as potential reasons for criticism aimed at romance novels (chick lit novels’ predecessors) as suggested and listed by Regis (5).

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