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In:

Susan Brähler; Kerstin-Anja Münderlein (Hrsg.), "When men are unprepared and look not for it" : in Memoriam Christoph Houswitschka, Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, S. 455-471. DOI: 10.20378/irb-96531

Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-105219

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 04.12.2024

Between Maternal Absence and Intensive Mothering: The Challenges of Black (Single) Mothering in Candice Carty-Williams's Novels

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When my – then – nine year-old daughter told me, in a disconcerted tone of voice, how she had realised that in the last five books she had read, every single mother was either dead, enchanted, or otherwise absent, I was proud to tell her – in a vocabulary suitable for her age group – that she had just discovered that the "trope of dead and absent mothers" (Åström 1) permeates recent children's fiction. Little did she know that she had touched on "a transhistorical phenomenon, a cultural conversation about mothers, mothering and motherhood that transcends historical and generic divisions" (1). And even less did she know at the time that I had – in the context of writing my doctoral thesis – made a similar observation for Caribbean literatures of migration: here, too, the absent mother trope is fulfilled and the female *Bildungsroman* or "novel of transformation" (Stein 29), written between the 1970s and 2000s, abounds with examples of dead or traumatised and thus emotionally inaccessible mothers as well as fraught mother-daughter relationships.

While the recurrent topic of absent or traumatised mothers and generational conflict eventually did not feature prominently in my PhD project, I continued to look out for more recent examples in Black British writing. The memorial volume for Christoph Houswitschka, with whom I had the honour to work at the Chair of English Literature for a total of 20 years, seemed a very fitting context for a contribution thematically linking back to the doctoral thesis he supervised. Numerous were the times he would show up in the door frame to my office, a book in hand and an impish smile on his face, telling me that he had – yet again – accidentally bought a book that he had forgotten he already possessed and that he would like to give it to me, thinking I could be interested. Most of the time, it would have been a piece of diasporic fiction, a topic that we had a joint interest in.

In what is to follow, I will examine a new and celebrated voice in Black British writing,[1] Candice Carty-Williams (born in 1989). Her first novel and immediate bestseller *Queenie* (2019) won the Book of the Year title at the 2020 British Book Awards, "making Carty-Williams the first black writer ever to get the prize" (Allardice), and was celebrated by the judges as "a book that was capable of changing

[1] The author of this contribution is aware of the marginalising tendencies behind the label 'Black British literature', which have recently been voiced, among others, by Bernardine Evaristo and Jackie Kay (Burkitt 84-85).

industry perceptions of what stories can be commercially and critically successful" (Flood par. 6). While *Queenie* has been broadcast as a TV drama on Channel 4 since June 2024, Carty-Williams's second novel *People Person* (2022), categorised as 'domestic noir', has not met the same critical acclaim. Both novels are set in a post-Brexit-referendum, #MeToo, Black-Lives-Matter South London and revolve around young Black British adults struggling with (institutional) racism and sexism, with toxic masculinity, destructive family dynamics and generational trauma, the detrimental effects of excessive social media consumption, mental health issues, and – last but not the least – absent mothers and strained mother-daughter relationships. It is the latter two aspects which I address in this paper showing that Carty-Williams's fiction perpetuates and innovates "the maternal loss pattern within black female diaspora literature" (Putnam 123)[2] and the post-colonial motif of the fraught mother-daughter relationship for young third-generation Black Britons and at the same time criticises intensive mothering practices. By exposing maternal absence, intensive mothering and mental health problems to be the negative effects of black (single) mothering, Carty-Williams voices a feminist critique of the contemporary challenges of black mothering, of its stigmatisation as well as the lack of social and financial support for black (single) mothers.

The Absent Mother Trope and Mother-Daughter Conflicts in Caribbean Diasporic Literature and Black British Fiction

In her introduction to the essay collection *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination* (2017), Berit Åström deplores that the absent mother trope has not gained adequate critical attention although it has permeated literature across the globe and the genres for centuries: "She [the absent mother] tends to slip by unnoticed" (4). Åström elaborates on the four different approaches to the topic that she identifies in past research, categorising them into biographical and socio-cultural readings, psychoanalytical approaches, where the mother poses a threat to the daughter's individuation, requiring matricide as a way out of the dilemma, and narratological readings, in which "the dead mother is simply a plot device that creates a conflict which needs to be resolved" (2) in the narrative. Importantly, the author stresses that in the context of fictional representations of maternal absence, 'dead' does not automatically mean 'absent', as the dead mother may still haunt her children, while 'physically present' often needs to be equated with 'emotionally or psychologically absent' (11).

[2] The absent mother trope has also been identified in recent Latina writing by Deborah Paredez (2010) as well as third-generation Nigerian women's fiction by Sola Owonibi and Olufunmilayo Gaji (2017).

In the early 2000s, the absent mother trope was identified for Caribbean diasporic writing by scholars like Amanda Putnam, Caroline Rody and Simone A. James Alexander. It can predominantly be found in narratives featuring a daughter in her teenage or early adult years having to negotiate her cultural identities. These are essentially "daughter-centric stories" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2; see also Mollegaard 175) where the narrative voice and perspective of the daughter dominate ("daughterly voice"; Willey 275), and the mother's voice is only ever filtered through her daughter's – biased – perspective. Alexander equates the mother with the motherland (i.e. the Caribbean island) so that mother-daughter conflicts and maternal absence will not just point to a rift in maternal lineage and the passing-on of transgenerational knowledge but also to the daughter's jeopardised feelings of belonging, of being at home (8). Even if they have been themselves the victims of rape and abuse, the mothers in novels written by Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat, Michelle Cliff, Paule Marshall, Maryse Condé, or Gisèle Pineau are perceived by the daughters as essentially "compromised or alienated figure[s]" (Rody 121) "aligned with colonial forces" (Homer 1). The daughters eventually reject their biological mothers because they, i.e. the daughters, "are seeking a cultural identity beyond the constraints of the colonial powers" (Homer 1).

In Black British novels which have the daughter generation grow up on the British Isles, the mother-daughter relationship is no less fraught. Andrea Levy's novels, for example, revolve around second-generation Black Britons whose parents emigrated from the Caribbean and continue to suffer from feelings of uprootedness and alienation with an unwelcoming, xenophobic 'mother country'. In these texts, the daughters are confronted with conservative gender roles and traditional educational principles in the home, where their mothers take on the function of gatekeepers,[3] while paradoxically the mothers also insist on their daughters to become strong and independent women as well as academically and professionally successful, to have the success they themselves, being new to the country, have been barred from.[4] In this situation of overlapping generational and cultural conflicts, the daughters have to negotiate, without adequate maternal support, how they can be black *and* British and carve out a space for themselves to feel at home within British society.

[3] According to Philippa Kafka, who focuses on Latina writing, gatekeepers are "senior women in Puerto Rican and other cultures [functioning] as cultural collaborationists, as gatekeepers. Latina writers depict these gatekeepers as the group that perpetuates the patriarchal rules and regulations, acting as their custodians, like vigilant watchdogs. . . . [They are] perpetuating inequitable gendered power relations" (xxvii).

[4] For an assessment of how intensive mothering practices can be interpreted as "a self-interested way for mothers to feel as if they are gaining status through their children" (Hays 159) see Hays and Ennis.

In both of Carty-Williams's novels, the hardships of black mothering continue into this second generation. Carty-Williams has her mothers suffer from domestic abuse and the ensuing trauma and depression, alcoholism and unemployment. Without exception, they are single mothers and are confronted with the negative stereotypes which come with being a so-called 'baby mother' (definition see below). The struggles of the mother generation, however, are not those of the daughter-protagonists, which is what distances the two generations from each other. For members of the third generation, the challenges of defining a black identity are no longer limited to a national dimension, i.e. the task of negotiating a Black *British* identity. The challenges of these daughters blend with those that Generation Z has to face as a whole as well as with global concerns of social inequality, racism and sexism as voiced by the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements – movements which these characters sympathise with. This third generation has earned their college degrees, with a tendency to be over-qualified, but has to come to terms with Gen Z's problems of job insecurity and the ensuing lack of financial stability, of gentrification and finding affordable housing, of social media dependence as well as mental health problems like anxiety or depression. These problems are intensified by their ethnicity when, for example, Queenie realises she is the token 'BAME' in her journal's office (Q[5] 182, 213), when the estate agent makes inappropriate advances when she is desperately looking for an affordable apartment (Q 33-34), when gentrification changes the face of mostly 'Caribbean' South London irretrievably (Q 210) or when her dating app only yields messages from men with abusive sexual fantasies fetishising her black female body (Q 60). The rising social antagonisms in British society, which the Brexit referendum has merely made more tangible, affect these characters, too.

These intersections of specifically Black British concerns with those of Gen Z, the social conflicts preceding and following Brexit and a concern with global anti-discrimination movements cannot only be found in Carty-Williams's fiction but also in characters like Yazz from Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and the unnamed protagonist of Jo Hamya's *Three Rooms* (2021), to name but two recent examples.

New Momism, Intensive Mothering, and the Repercussions for Black Mothering

Seen from a different angle, the absence of mothers in diasporic writing not only comments on the social stigmatisation of black mothers but also points to their

[5] The abbreviation Q will be used for quotes from the novel *Queenie*; PP will refer to *People Person*.

marginalisation in scientific research. Black mothers started to receive scholarly attention as late as the 1990s (Caplan xxi) because they seemingly did not

> fit the dominant ideology, according to which the ideal mother is heterosexual, at least middle-class, 'white,' able-bodied, neither too old nor too young, born in the country where she resides, and not imprisoned, as well as having children to whom she gave birth and being married to the children's 'white' father. (Caplan xxi; see also Garcia Coll et al.)

It was in 2004 when American scholars Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels published *The Mommy Myth* and coined the gender ideology of 'new momism', whose beginnings they identify in the "media obsessions" (7) with motherhood starting in the mid-1980s. The core assumption of new momism is "that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children" (4). Importantly, the co-authors criticise that this motherhood ideal comes with norms, practices, and "standards for success [that] are impossible to meet" (4).

Within the new momism ideology, mothers are invested with agency: they can actively decide to pursue professional careers or stay at home, to raise their children with or without a partner, etc. However, this autonomy is paradoxically limited by the premise that, before any other active decision, the only 'true' choice for women "is to become a 'mom' and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism" (5). New momism thus links back to what American sociologist Sharon Hays has identified as the ideal of intensive mothering. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), Hays explains that for American society, intensive mothering is the only socially accepted, "gendered [child rearing] model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (x). In this "logic of unselfish nurturing" (x), it is always the mother, as the primary nurturer, who is to be held responsible for the well-being and thriving of the child (8), with motherblame the 'logical' result in case the children's development is a little less than perfect. It goes without saying that this ideology cements gender hierarchies and paves the way for a neoliberal market logic to invade the home, where children become their mothers' social capital (Vandenbeld Giles in Ennis; see also Hays 50).

In her study *Black Mothers and Attachment Parenting* (2021), Patricia Hamilton has very recently revisited the ideologies of new momism and intensive mothering for black mothers in Britain and Canada. She identifies the intensive mothering ideal as "white and middle-class in origin" and thus as "implicitly exclud[ing] and exploit[ing] marginalized women" (19). Acquiring 'perfect' mothering skills, according to Hamilton, depends essentially on "race, class, dis/ability, sexuality

and other socially produced categories" (18) and the contradictions inherent in intensive mothering will be felt much more by black women, who are more likely to be working-class single mothers and to work in low-paid positions (19-20).

The British author and journalist Candice Brathwaite, in her turn, laments the stigmatisation of Black British mothers in her 2020 memoir-slash-manifesto *I Am Not Your Baby Mother*. The label 'baby mother' derives from Caribbean English and denotes unmarried single black mothers who have been abandoned by the biological father of their child(ren) either before or soon after childbirth. According to Brathwaite, baby mothers are "often painted as one of the lowliest [groups] in black British society" (1) and the term has come to be used pejoratively "to dismantle and disable the legitimacy of black women's version of motherhood in general. It's used in a way to demean and perhaps unintentionally put a red mark through any ideas along the lines of assimilating black motherhood with positivity and success" (4). Thus while the single-motherhood of white, middle-class, working women will be interpreted as a deliberate choice, their black counterparts are immediately branded with a set of negative stereotypes. In a context where intensive mothering is the all-encompassing ideal against which mothers across classes and ethnic groups are measured, thereby marginalising alternative, non-Western mothering practices like communal mothering or othermothering,[6] the baby mothers of Carty-Williams's novels need to be read as a critical comment on the stigmatisation inherent in social constructions of black motherhood.

"It was no way to live at thirty, this emotional dependence": Intensive Mothering

It is in Candice Carty-Williams's second novel *People Person* that we encounter the best-elaborated example of intensive mothering through the characters Janet and Dimple. The novel makes sure to construct Dimple, the daughter and protagonist, as the outgrowth of a too enmeshed and controlling motherly care. Dimple is one of five half-siblings, who grow up in South London unaware of each other as they are raised by four different baby mothers in their joint biological father Cyril Pennington's absence. Aged 32, Dimple still lives with her mother Janet, a barrister, in a comfortable house, is trapped in a toxic relationship with her boyfriend Kyron, 'works' as a mediocre social media "influencer in the sense that she believed she was one" (PP 28) and has no plans for the future ("She still had goals. She didn't know exactly what they were. But she had goals.", PP 30). Dimple deduces her self-worth from "how many likes she got on a selfie [and] the emojis

[6] Othermothers can be defined as "women who participate in the parenting of a child, though the child may not be related to them through either blood or marriage" (McCandless 1). They engage "in all actions of mothering while respecting and valuing the bond between the biological/adoptive mother and her child" (1).

[her followers] dropped" (PP 26). Early in the novel, we learn of Janet's overindulging behaviour: "She'd grown up getting spoiled by her mum when it came to presents, to make up for nothing from Cyril every Christmas and birthday" (PP 28). Janet is characterised as a very encroaching mother: "Janet always knew what was best for her daughter, even when her daughter didn't agree" (89). She relishes in being Dimple's sole attachment figure and makes sure to remind her daughter that "she [Dimple] didn't *have* any friends" (108).

When Dimple decides to end her relationship with the abusive Kyron, the latter attacks her and, in the fight, accidentally knocks his head against the kitchen counter and faints (36). In this emergency situation, Dimple, assuming Kyron dead, cannot think of any other solution but to call her barely known half-siblings to help her dispose of Kyron's body in one of London's big construction sites. Dimple and her half-siblings gradually start bonding with each other over the jointly committed crime. Janet, however, is unaware of her daughter being in touch with her half-siblings. When one night Janet finds "these strangers" (116) sitting over dinner in her kitchen, she initially believes she has been broken into and warns the half-siblings: "I am fiercely, fiercely protective of my girl. And if anything at all were to happen to her, if any harm were to come to her, I would do everything in my power to ruin the persons responsible in every single way a person could be ruined" (PP 122).

Dimple eventually sees through her mother's manipulative behaviour and comes to interpret her current problems as deriving from intensive mothering practices: "she [is] completely unable to be self-sufficient, emotionally and otherwise, and leaned heavily on her mum (and, before the break-up, Kyron too . . .) for everything, up to and including: support, money, and especially love and attention" (29). In *People Person*, intensive mothering is thus presented as one way in which the black baby mother overcompensates the biological father's absence. Additionally, the supposedly 'unselfish nurturing' (Hays x) that intensive mothering entails is exposed as the exact opposite, as egotism on the part of the mother claiming the daughter for herself, pretending to protect her from the dangers of the 'real world' while in fact selfishly inhibiting her development into an independent, responsible adult and her emotional stability: Janet's happiness inherently depends on Dimple's "emotional dependence" (PP 32), the daughter's need for motherly care and support. *People Person* thus exposes intensive mothering as detrimental to the child's development and an over-reaction to an assumed lack of a paternal attachment figure.

"Eventually she stopped speaking to me": Maternal Absence, Daughterly Crisis, and Motherblame

In Carty-Williams's first novel, first-person narrator Queenie has fond memories of a happy childhood spent with her mother Sylvie, but the novel leaves no doubt that Sylvie, another of Carty-Williams's baby mothers, used to be as overbearing and enmeshed as Dimple's mother Janet. During one of her therapy sessions late in the novel, Queenie nostalgically reminisces: "We lived together, me and my mum, in a tiny little house in Mitcham. We were obsessed with each other, I remember. I couldn't go anywhere without her, and she couldn't go anywhere without me. We had our own world, me and my mum" (Q 296). The mother-daughter bond is severed, however, when Sylvie finds a new partner, Roy, and both mother and daughter become victims of domestic abuse. During Roy's verbal attacks on Queenie, Sylvie remains passive and thus, in the eyes of the daughter, becomes her stepfather's accomplice: "He [Roy] hated me. He made her hate me. It was destroying me" (298). At the age of eleven, Queenie's random punishments range from having to sleep in the car to spending an extended period in a separate flat all by herself, making her feel completely abandoned.

We learn about Queenie's childhood memories as late as in chapter twenty-three of thirty, i.e. only once Queenie finds herself at the bottom of a downward spiral into anxiety and depression and has taken up therapy. Up until the novel's ending, Queenie's mother is marked by her physical absence and, in the short instances in which she *does* feature, by her silence and uneasiness around her daughter: "Eventually she stopped speaking to me" (297). Thus, the reader is left to speculate until late in the novel what brought about the rift between Queenie and her mother.

At the novel's opening, Queenie has just had a miscarriage and it is not her mother but her Aunt Maggie she asks to pick her up from the hospital. Her (white) boyfriend Tom has recently broken up with her (17) and asks her to move out of their flat and Queenie plunges herself into a series of casual sexual adventures with white men fetishising her black body (Q 52, 60, 116), which effectively "diminish [her] self-worth" (Q 78) and risk her friendships, job (Q 269), physical (Q 118, 130) and mental health: "I couldn't seem to stop myself from self-destructing" (Q 207). Overwhelmed by the overt sexism and racism and the more subtle classism she is being confronted with at her workplace, within her friend group, the self-proclaimed 'Corgis', and within dating culture, Queenie descends into an identity crisis: "'What do you think about yourself?' . . . 'That I'm insane, mainly'" (290).

Although we are still left in the dark about the reasons behind Queenie's rejection of her biological mother, both Queenie and her friends, her therapist Janet (Q 296) and even Sylvie herself consistently construct a cause-and-effect relationship

between maternal absence and Queenie's abandonment and attachment issues. During her first of many visits to a sexual health clinic, Queenie realises that she is "desperately lacking some sort of maternal figure in [her] life" (Q 127), and her Jewish, upper-class friend Cassandra actively blames Sylvie for Queenie's lack of self-esteem when she comments, "[y]our self-esteem is a joke. . . . With a mum like yours, it's no surprise" (Q 262). Cassandra is convinced that Queenie's break-up with Tom "must be bringing up all sorts of mum abandonment stuff" (Q 161). Sylvie has internalised the new momism narrative as well, blaming herself for Queenie's mental health issues: "I've let her down, I should have been better to her, that way she might have been better to herself. . . . I shouldn't have left her" (178). Over the course of multiple therapy sessions, Queenie comes to interpret her compulsive sexual encounters as a desperate yearning for attention coupled with a fear of abandonment that she retrospectively blames on her mother's original abandonment of her as a teenager: "I wanted someone to like me after they'd had sex with me. Isn't that pathetic? . . . It's because I'm so damaged, Janet. Years of being told I was nothing, years of being ignored! I'll take any attention, even if it is being fucked!" (326). Queenie has lost any sense of agency ("some sort of male-voice-command-activated sex-bot", Q 118; "some sort of idiot incapable of independent thought", Q186) and has developed a negative and unstable self-image: "I guess I don't matter. Not to Cassandra, not to Guy, not to anyone. My mum, my dad, Ted. Tom. Nobody has ever wanted me, not properly" (Q 239).

In summary, motherblame in *Queenie* is voiced by virtually all female characters. As the following section, however, is going to show, motherblame is eventually exposed as unfounded and thus an attitude which Queenie and her friends cannot uphold for very long. The novel ends with signs of transgenerational reconciliation and the daughter's recognition that Sylvie was the co-victim of Roy's domestic abuse and is thus as traumatised as her child.

While *People Person* has been termed a novel about "daddy issues" (Allardice; Teo), my argument is that it would be wrong to reduce the half-siblings' problems to a joint *paternal* absence. Of course, Cyril Pennington's abandonment of all four baby mothers and the one meeting he forces upon all of his five teenage children constitute major launching events of the novel. But it is only when we take the absence of the baby mothers into consideration that we fully understand the siblings' struggles. Importantly, Cyril Pennington is himself the 'victim' of maternal absence as he is born out of wedlock in Jamaica in 1970 and is left behind when his mother Delores emigrates to England with her new husband soon afterwards. He is raised by his grandparents, whom he takes to be his biological parents, and is allowed to join his mother in London only as a teenager of fifteen: "It was no wonder he had attachment issues" (276). In old age, Delores blames herself for

Cyril's carelessness and unsteady, irresponsible behaviour towards his children: "Your dad was just afraid of love . . . And it was my fault" (196).

Four of the five half-siblings are presented as struggling with problems which identify them at the same time as members of Gen Z and as underprivileged black South Londoners confronted with racial prejudice: Danny is a plumber and doting single father with a criminal past; Nikisha is an unemployed baby mother of two with an unstable housing situation (PP 142): "It's like history repeating itself, I guess" (PP 119). Prynce, a womaniser like his father, lives with his mother Bernice in a council estate and is "even more unemployed than his big sister" Nikisha (PP 60). Dimple, as we have seen, grows up more privileged thanks to her mother Janet's good income but is financially and emotionally dependent on her mother and stuck in a toxic relationship. Lizzie, who is born only two weeks apart from Dimple, is the only successful sibling: she is a medical student and can afford a London apartment together with her partner Patrice, with whom she has plans for a family. As she does not emotionally nor financially depend on the siblings' support, she feels least drawn to their company and, for most of the novel, feels no emotional attachment to them: "Lizzie couldn't give a fuck about any of them. She wanted to go home and tell her mum that Cyril had basically kidnapped her and forced her to spend time with a group of Jamaicans" (PP 17). Lizzie is embarrassed that her half-siblings confirm many of the prejudices held against young Black Britons and blames their mothers for their shortcomings: "From what *her* mum had told her about Nikisha and Prynce's mum, they probably didn't grow up with any real discipline, which meant that they were surely *primed* to be criminals, *ready* even" (PP 75).

Overall, the baby mothers Bernice, Tracy, Janet and Kemi are mostly absent throughout the novel. The pattern of absence is set by grandmother Delores, who is represented as an emotionally cold, gatekeeping Caribbean matriarch with little empathy for her son and grandchildren. The baby mothers of the next generation are merely the objects of conversations among the third generation of half-siblings but are hardly ever physically present. The relationship Bernice has with her two children Nikisha and Prynce, for example, is dominated by maternal neglect: "She's doing her own thing. We never know what it is, but we know she's busy, so. That's good" (195). Left with very little maternal care, Nikisha has no other choice but to revert to self-mothering and to stepping in as a mother figure for her younger brother: "that girl raised herself and then Prynce, too" (PP 283). The maternal loss pattern continues even into the third generation as Nikisha herself is a baby mother and lives with only one of her two children. Dimple concludes: "Watching Bernice in action, Dimple could see why Nikisha was the way she was . . . It was both a trauma response and a survival technique" (217).

After her fight over her daughter's growing attachment to her supposedly good-for-nothing half-siblings, Janet takes up drinking (again) and leaves for a "detox retreat" (PP 201). We learn that she has had problems with alcoholism in the past so that Dimple's childhood presents itself as an alternation of intensive mothering periods on the one hand and of maternal absence on the other due to Janet's alcohol abuse and rehabilitation schemes: "Dimple was too frustrated to feel sorry for Janet. She didn't want this to be happening again. She thought her mum had left all of the drinking alone a couple of years back after some intensive therapy, and yet here they were" (127).

We meet Lizzie's Nigerian mother Kemi only once in the epilogue to *People Person* when she attends Cyril's funeral. She is viewed by the other baby mothers with disdain and judged as "[t]oo stush" (PP 217), i.e. too snobbish and stuck-up, to seek the company of "the rest of [Cyril's] litter" (PP 20). It is through the Lizzie-Kemi pair that *People Person* subtly undermines the logic of motherblame: when Dimple reflects on her own mental health problems in contrast with Lizzie's resilience and unwavering personality, it becomes clear that the differences between the same-aged sisters cannot simply be explained by the way they have been reared by their mothers as they have both been rather encroaching and enmeshed in their daughters' lives:

> Dimple thought how Lizzie was like the better, sharper version of her. Lizzie actually had her life together. She was in a functioning relationship, had an actual career ahead of her, was more focused.
>
> But why? . . . Neither of them had a present dad. Both of them, from what Dimple could tell of Lizzie, had stifling mums. (PP 234)

When the baby mothers *do* meet on the occasion of Delores's wake and Cyril's funeral, they are not presented as caring mothers but rather – and interestingly with the exception of Danny's *white* mother – as jealous rival ex-lovers engaged in a ridiculous competition over whose relationship with Cyril lasted the longest and whom he eventually preferred: "She think she's better than the rest of the babymother's [sic]?" (PP 196). This competition is clear evidence of how much pressure is on the black baby mothers' shoulders. With little other assets to call their own, they define themselves via their attractiveness and through the social capital which their children represent. While Janet "saw Bernice as her main competition" (PP 216), Bernice in her turn "had always seen Janet as her main competition" (PP 216). Bernice prides herself with being "babymother number one. The original" (PP 217) and, in a passive-aggressive venture, pretends not to recognise Janet at the wake: "'And your name is?' she asked, knowing full well what Janet's name was" (PP 217).

Just like Queenie, Dimple undergoes an identity crisis after she has lived through a series of negative experiences which expose her lack of resilience and self-esteem: it soon turns out that Kyron is not dead but had merely been unconscious. He now blackmails Dimple with revenge porn, which he threatens to publish on the internet. When Dimple is repeatedly let down and financially exploited by Cyril, when grandmother Delores dies and Janet confronts her in a drunken state about her growing attachment to her half-siblings, Dimple experiences a breakdown and flees to Lizzie's flat: "She felt so disjointed inside herself. She didn't feel like she belonged to a place, didn't feel like her company belonged to a person" (PP 255). Lizzie, the prettier, successful and more rational foil to Dimple, helps Dimple realise how giving up her fake Instagram self will help her invest in relationships and a career in the 'real' world and eventually improve her overall situation: "The person you are on the internet isn't as good as the person you are in real life" (PP 272).

Both intensive mothering *and* maternal absence become functions of black baby mothering in Carty-Williams's novels and set a pattern that transcends several generations of a family. Intensive mothering is shown to be a means of over-compensating the missing father figures as well as social disadvantages and financial precarity and at the same time exposed as egotistical as the mothers try to bind their daughters to themselves, thereby inhibiting their development into independent adults. Maternal absence is presented as an effect of the trauma following domestic abuse, of alcoholism or long working hours in underpaid jobs. Both mechanisms expose and criticise – by way of negative example – how much pressure is on black baby mothers' shoulders in contemporary Britain and how they are stigmatised as black single mothers by society as a whole, including their black communities. There is a moment in both novels when the daughters parrot the narrative of motherblame and interpret their mental health issues as the logical effect of their mothers' shortcomings in rearing them. It is only at the very end of both novels that the daughter generation initiates a process of transgenerational reconciliation.

"[W]e are gathered here to celebrate": Forging Female Solidarity, Celebrating Families of Choice and Diversity

Before they seek reconciliation with their biological mothers, the daughters look elsewhere for nurture and emotional support. We meet several female characters who support both Queenie and Dimple in times of crisis and fulfil the roles of othermothers for the protagonists: Queenie's white, middle-class colleague Darcy is an unwavering pillar of support and Dimple's older sister Nikisha takes on a parenting role for Dimple, helping the younger solve the problems with Kyron (PP 210). Veronica unquestioningly takes her granddaughter Queenie in after her

panic attack (Q 252) and gives her the maternal warmth and security she is craving for (Q 105). After a few weeks spent in her grandparents' home in South London, however, Queenie feels suffocated by the Caribbean matriarch's strict regiment and conservative views on how Queenie can heal mentally and physically. Reconnecting with her ethnic roots is thus only a temporary solution. Eventually, it takes talking therapy for Queenie to resolve her mental health problems and come to terms with her Black (British) identity.

Dimple, in her turn, quickly realises how her despotic grandmother Delores is not an apt attachment figure. In a venture that can easily be discovered to be a marketing strategy to fashion her online self, Dimple briefly considers to 'go back' to the Caribbean for healing:

> [I]n the video she spoke about how it was so important to connect to her family history, and to think about the women she came from, the place she came from. She spoke about how learning about the past of this strong woman [Delores] had woken something up in her, a new determination, a new drive. She added that she'd like to go to Jamaica to trace her family history, if any travel companies wanted to sponsor her. (PP 274)

The touristic vocabulary used in the online video and the praise for the "strong woman" but in fact not very caring grandmother expose Dimple's half-heartedness about her plan to travel to the Caribbean as well as her skill of anticipating what her online followers want to hear.

In the final pages of both novels, the protagonists have started to heal and are shown surrounded by their respective network of important others. It is essential to note here that Carty-Williams herself, in a clever marketing coup, initially labelled Queenie a 'Black Bridget Jones'. As Heike Mißler has very convincingly established in her article "A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams's *Queenie* (2019): Challenging Discourses of Race and Gender in the Chick-Lit Genre" (2023), *Queenie* "has innovatively politicised the chick-lit formula by rewriting and subverting the neoliberal and postfeminist elements" (2) of earlier white, middle-class chick-lit texts and thereby exposed the "whiteness of the genre per se" (2). In one important aspect, *Queenie* deviates from earlier chick-lit when the novel's ending highlights the relevance of "self-acceptance" as well as "female friendships and solidarity" (7) and thus shifts the focus away from the love plot and the eventual bliss found in heterosexual relationships 'Bridget Jones style'. It is telling that virtually all the heterosexual relationships in *Queenie* and *People Person* are abusive and that examples of toxic masculinity abound. It is certainly no coincidence that Darcy, one of Queenie's most important attachment figures, is not an attractive, successful white lawyer as in *Bridget Jones's Diary* but a female white middle-class colleague. Heike Mißler concludes: "*Queenie* constructs an ending that appears more timely in the days of the MeToo and the Black Lives

Matter movement, as it privileges self-care, strong community ties, and female solidarity over romantic ambitions" (11).

Queenie congregates her family of choice in a restaurant to "celebrate the well health and recovery of your girl and mine, our warrior, our badboy, Queenie Jenkins" (Q 379). The novel's ending cannot but be read as a celebration of female and transgenerational solidarity and diversity: Queenie's support network consists of biological family – Queenie's grandparents, her aunt and cousin as well as her mother Sylvie – and intentional family represented by her three best friends Darcy, Cassandra, and Kyazike. While Darcy represents white middle-class Britain and positively stands out among the "well-meaning white liberals" (Q 99) Queenie encounters at work, Cassandra, educated, Jewish, upper-class, has supported Queenie financially throughout the novel and has reconciled with her after a major fight. Kyazike's family immigrated from Uganda. She is proud of her cultural heritage and bonds with Queenie over a Black Lives Matter march in Brixton. The novel concludes with the soothing affirmation of continued support: "We, all of the people who love you, who have been there for you, will be behind that door" (Q 385).

Queenie has come to understand that she wrongfully accused her mother of not loving her enough and resolves, in a list of New Year's resolutions reminiscent of Bridget Jones, "to repair relationship with Mum" (Q 193). She even reproaches herself for not having realised how her mother has been traumatised even more than her by two consecutive partners:

> How could I have been so selfish, how couldn't I have seen? This tiny, meek woman being swallowed by an armchair was the same woman who started to raise me, the woman who'd been so obsessed with me that we wore matching outfits until I was eight, who always told me that I was strong enough to be a queen. She'd been so mentally and physically battered by men that she couldn't find her voice anymore. But she was still my mum. (Q 320)

Dimple, too, includes her mother Janet in her social network. In the epilogue of *People Person*, Dimple's extended family – part (Indian-)Jamaican, part white British, part Nigerian – assembles to attend Cyril Pennington's funeral. Five years have elapsed since Dimple's final, unsuccessful confrontation with her father and her acceptance that she and her half-siblings would "have been worse" (PP 331) with Cyril in their lives. It has also been five years since the first signs of reconciliation between Dimple and Janet. As we can gather from the following dialogue, the two women start negotiating their roles and try to find a new balance between emotional closeness and daughterly independence:

> "I get it. You don't need me, Dimple. I'm receiving that loud and clear."
>
> "It's not that, Mum,' Dimple said. 'I'll always need you. I just don't need you today."
>
> "Oh." Janet nodded. . . .

> "I love you, Mum," Dimple said. "You're still my best friend. And Cyril won't ever come close to that. You were the one who was there."
>
> "Damn right I was," Janet reminded her daughter. "When you come home, let's talk about me doing the ... detox thing for a bit longer."
>
> "I think that's a good idea." Dimple smiled. (PP 315)

From the way the half-siblings interact with each other at Cyril's funeral, we can infer that they have formed stable relationships. Dimple has developed into a responsible adult: she is mother of a baby girl, whose father Roman is "the opposite of Dad" (PP 336). All the baby mothers are present, too, and Nikisha ends her eulogy with the recognition: "I want to say thank you to our mothers, Bernice, Tracy, Kemi and Janet. They raised us for you [Cyril], too" (PP 341).

Conclusion

At a moment when "Brexit [threatens to] fuck us all over" (Q 383), Carty-Williams's novels call for solidarity and mutual acceptance across age and generation, sexual and gender identity, ethnicity and class. In their final constellations, the novels prioritise transgenerational, female solidarity over heterosexual relationships. With the only stable relationship in both novels being that of bisexual Lizzie and her lesbian partner Patrice, Carty-Williams also celebrates diverse family structures.

In rejecting intensive mothering, exposing maternal absence as the inevitable outcome of trauma and social disadvantage and in having the daughters grow out of motherblame, both *Queenie* and *People Person* fight against the stigmatisation of black single mothers in contemporary British society, expose the social challenges of black mothering and turn against the logic of new momism. By making their protagonists weave a truly diverse network of important other(mother)s, the texts question Western ideals of mothering and conventional ideas of what constitutes a family.

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