

# Crossing genre boundaries: H. J. Golakai's Afropolitan chick-lit mysteries

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## Abstract

Crime fiction by women writers across the globe has in recent years begun to explore the position of women detectives within post-feminist cultural contexts, moving away from the explicit refusal of the heterosexual romance plot in earlier feminist 'hard-boiled' fiction. In this article, I analyse Hawa Jande Golakai's *The Lazarus Effect* (2011) and *The Score* (2015) as part of the tradition of crime fiction by women writers in South Africa. Joining local crime writers such as Angela Makholwa, Golakai not only questions orthodox conceptions of gender and sexuality in traditional iterations of the crime novel, but also combines elements of chick-lit with the crime plot. Reading the archetypal quest structure of the two genres against the background of Sara Ahmed's cultural critique of happiness, I argue that Golakai inventively recasts the recent sub-genre of the chick-lit mystery from the perspective of an Afropolitan detective. Her detective tenaciously undercuts the future-directed happiness script that structures conventional chick-lit and detective novels with their respective focus on finding a fulfilling heterosexual, monogamous romantic relationship, and the resolution of the crime and restoration of order. In this way, the novels defy the frequently assumed apolitical nature of chick-lit texts and also allow us to reimagine the idea of Afropolitanism, outside of its dominant consumerist form, as a critical Afropolitanism that emerges from an openness to be affected by the unhappiness and suffering of others.

**Keywords** African chick-lit, Afropolitanism, chick-lit mysteries, Golakai, migration, post-feminism, South African crime fiction

*The Lazarus Effect* (2011) and its sequel *The Score* (2015) by Liberian author Hawa Jande Golakai introduce a new dynamic to the burgeoning popular fiction scene in South Africa. Her texts – both published with the South African publisher Kwela – can be regarded as the first crime novels in the South African context that feature a detective from elsewhere on the continent. South African crime writers have frequently addressed migration from other parts of Africa in their writing and included sleuths whose investigations lead them to other African countries (Fasselt, 2016). Golakai, who studied and worked as a researcher in Cape Town for a few years until her return to Monrovia in the early 2010s, adds to these engagements the perspective of a transnational, or Afropolitan, woman investigator from Liberia. While she investigates a case of missing children in *The Lazarus Effect*, the sequel centres on large-scale private and public sector corruption in Cape Town.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to a migrant sleuth, Golakai introduces an innovative aesthetics of genre blending that combines chick-lit elements with the crime plot, rewriting the normative

formulas of both genres. I argue, in this article, that Golakai's technique of genre crossing can be read as the equivalent of her renegotiation of more conventional constructions of chick-lit heroines and detective identities in the South African cultural field. While the crime and chick-lit genres in their archetypal iterations are both preoccupied with the restoration or 'promise of happiness' that, as Sara Ahmed (2010) observes, directs us towards living what is deemed the 'good life', Golakai's investigator can be read as a 'melancholic migrant' who tenaciously undercuts the neoliberal imperative to be happy (Ahmed, 2010). At the same time, the novels allow us to reimagine 'the Afropolitan' as a figure willing to be affected not just by what Ahmed calls 'happy objects', but also by that which lies outside the parameters of the 'good life'. In doing so, Golakai's novels foreground the possibilities arising from an openness to be affected by the suffering and unhappiness of others. I will first provide a brief overview of crime fiction and postfemininity in South Africa before moving to the discussion of Golakai's genre bending and rewriting of the happiness paradigm. This, as the last three sections of the article show, becomes manifest in three ways: first, the novels' recasting of the Afropolitan 'hipster'; the love plot, which moves away from the quest for the 'one and only'; and, finally, the texts' critical standpoint towards shopping and consumption.

### **Crime fiction, postfemininity and the new South African woman**

The presence of a sustained feminist politics in the portrayal of women detectives by women writers of the British 'Golden Age' remains a vexed debate in scholarship on feminist revision in crime fiction (Irons, 1995). Megan Hoffman, for instance, observes that portrayals of women in these works neither unequivocally embrace nor reject emancipatory principles. Instead, they are characterised by an inherent ambivalence, 'advocating a modern, active model of femininity that gives agency to female characters, while also displaying with their resolutions an emphasis on domesticity and on maintaining a heteronormative order' (Hoffman, 2016: 2). Women writers adopting and subverting the 'traditionally masculine tradition of male "'tough guy" hard-boiled fiction' (Walton and Jones, 1999: 3)<sup>2</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, articulate central concerns of second-wave feminists which criticised the social, economic and personal situations of women (Worthington, 2011). Heterosexual romance, traditionally constructed as the central feature defining and guiding women's lives, invariably becomes self-constraining for hard-boiled women detectives featured in these texts, as 'relationships with men are always possible threats to their hard-won autonomy and independence' (Reddy, 2003: 198). From the late 1980s onwards, and in line with much of the criticism levelled against second-wave feminists by postcolonial, lesbian and queer critics, crime fiction 'offered a space in which to represent other, doubly marginalised groups of women and texts featuring black female detectives, other racial and ethnic minority women sleuths and lesbian investigators began to appear' (Worthington, 2011: 167).

In South Africa, crime fiction by women writers, although written during apartheid, began to gain prominence in the postapartheid era and has been successfully adapted to voice local concerns, especially those relating to the reproduction of violent masculinities and endemic gender-based violence. As South African crime writer Margie Orford maintains, crime fiction is 'a flexible genre that can be bent enough out of shape to tell women's stories too. It can even exact a woman's fictional revenge' (Orford, 2013: 225). June Drummond's 1959 novel

*The Black Unicorn*, usually considered the first crime novel by a South African woman, rewrites 'the classical country-house mystery subgenre', yet avoids a clear political position on apartheid (Pretorius, 2014: 15). Later authors such as Margie Orford, whose Clare Heart thriller series mixes elements of the hard-boiled and the police procedural (Naidu, 2014: 74), more successfully display a committed feminist politics by addressing multiple axes of oppression including race, class and sexuality (Fletcher, 2013; Pretorius, 2014). Yet, while there is an abundance of crime fiction by white South African women,<sup>3</sup> crime writing by black women and scholarship on their works remain sparse.

The crime thrillers *Red Ink* (2007) and *Black Widow Society* (2013) by Angela Makholwa, who 'is recognised as South Africa's first black woman detective novelist' (Christensen, 2015: 320), are, however, beginning to receive more critical attention (Spencer, 2014; Christensen, 2015; De Kock, 2016; Murray, 2016). Nearly unprecedented in postapartheid writing due to their hybrid aesthetics of blending thriller/noir and chick-lit genres (Warnes, 2012: 982; De Kock, 2016: 9), Makholwa's novels resonate with recent developments in women's crime novels across the world. These have increasingly moved towards engagement with female experience and subject formation within neoliberal and post-feminist economies (Tomc, 1995). They thus also make visible the interrelatedness that Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff observe between 'the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neo-liberalism' and 'the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of post feminism' (2011: 7). In other words, these texts explore, but also critique, neoliberal attachments to objects or scenes such as 'the couple form, the love plot, the family, fame, work, wealth, or property', which Lauren Berlant identifies as the framework of 'cruel optimism', describing 'scenes of conventional desire' that cruelly promise belonging yet 'stand manifestly in the way of the subject's thriving' (2011: 45). At the same time, and even more poignantly, Makholwa's novels are informed by social and gender relations at the local level, as Ranka Primorac contends: 'In Africa and elsewhere, the thriller genre often encapsulates aspirational imaginings of modernity, and this self-confident first novel [*Red Ink*] revels unashamedly in detailed, carefully gendered evocations of the lifestyles and commodities desired by South African's rising middle-classes' (2009: 114).

These 'aspirational imaginings' in South Africa are deeply entrenched in mainstream postapartheid cultural discourses on freedom that tend to 'equate freedom with choice, especially to consume' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001: 44). For South African women, this idea of freedom promised a life unfettered by apartheid's restrictive notions of femininity and gave rise to possibilities of self-making and female agency through the acquisition of material goods. Visual and textual constructions emerging from this discourse include tropes such as that of the New South African woman (NSAW): 'As an embodied, consuming, heterosexual subject, the NSAW lives in the suburbs, is a cisgendered heterosexual woman, aspires to reproductive marriage, two cars, and travel outside the continent for business and leisure' (Gqola, 2016: 123). Pumla Gqola's NSAW thus mirrors, in the South African context, the 'paradoxical construction' which, for Stéphanie Genz, lies at the heart of her formulation of postfemininity:<sup>4</sup> Rather than signalling a clear break from earlier feminisms, it 'effects a double movement of empowerment and subordination, creating a subject position that has been described by Judith Butler as a "subjectivation", implying "both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection"' (2009: 31; see also Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). It is because of these slippages that Gill advocates an understanding of

post-feminism as a sensibility that 'emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them' (2007: 149). Gqola's work on the NSAW, furthermore, demonstrates the need to conceive of post-feminism as a transnational sensibility, rather than an originary Western notion. In Simidele Dosekun's view, 'to think transnationally about post-feminism is to consider how, as an entanglement of meanings, representations, sensibilities, practices and commodities, post-feminism may discursively and materially cross borders, including those within our feminist scholarly imaginaries' (2015: 965).

Golakai's works, like Makholwa's novels, bear the marks of this continuing, yet productive, struggle between agency and subordination, but add to it another layer of social and political complexity by focusing on a migrant detective who is rendered marginal within contemporary South African society. The locatedness of her texts at the intersection of the chick-lit and crime fiction forms results in continuous slippages between generic terrains, defying traditional generic constraints and closures. These disruptions of conventional, namely, Anglo-American genre norms not only emphasise the dynamic nature of post-feminist genres such as chick-lit novels, but also demonstrate that popular genres in Africa exist as an 'entanglement of meanings (Dosekun, 2015: 965), rather than following specific generic templates (see Newell, 2000). Golakai's genre crossings thus illustrate that 'contrary to claims that chick-lit has run its course, the genre still has room to grow, to enhance its cultural relevance and acknowledge the complexities of women's changing lives and experiences' (Benstock, 2006: 256).

### **Genre bending**

Admittedly, Golakai's practice of genre bending is not immediately visible. Paratextual elements of both *The Lazarus Effect* and *The Score*, including cover endorsements by prominent South African crime writer Deon Meyer, seem to firmly anchor the novels within the crime fiction genre and the tradition of black feminist revision of conventional figurations of gender and race in crime writing (see Murray, 2016). The standard 'identikit' (Harzewski, 2011: 2) visual markers of mainstream chick-lit fiction – a cover in shades of pink or soft pastels with a book title in loopy, glittering letters and illustrations of consumer items such as high-heeled shoes – are strikingly absent. However, the genre pronouncement apparent in the subtitle, 'A Vee Johnson mystery', that both novels carry positions Golakai's text in relation to the relatively new sub-genre of the chick-lit mystery. The chick-lit mystery has received less critical attention than the chick-noir,<sup>5</sup> which Makholwa employs in her novel *Black Widow Society* and which usually centres around a homicidal female protagonist who attempts to uncover crimes committed by her partner or husband and seeks revenge (Kennedy, 2017: 30). In chick-lit mysteries, combining elements of chick-lit and the detective mystery (the latter usually taking on the form of the 'whodunit' (Malmgren, 2010: 153)), the female heroine is usually the investigator rather than perpetrator of the crime.

Golakai's novel, as Sam Naidu points out, is 'tinged with the timbre of "chick-lit"', and the Liberian investigative journalist Voinjama (Vee) Johnson is 'a smart-talking, ass-kicking, sexy, transnational character' (2013: 730). Naidu's account thus also seems to suggest a melding of the two (at first glance) disparate genres of the hard-boiled detective and the chick-lit novel. At the same time, Naidu's description of Golakai's detective appears to lend itself to a

conception of Vee as an Afropolitan chick-lit heroine, who confidently inhabits an identity that traverses multiple geographies, that is, South Africa, where she currently resides, the USA, where she lived before moving to Cape Town, and Liberia of her childhood years. Lynda Gichanda Spencer provides an insightful reading of *The Lazarus Effect* in the context of crime fiction by women authors, contending that the novel with its focus on female sleuths and perpetrators 'both challenge[s] and problematize[s] societal conceptions of traditional femininities' (2014: 141). Building on Spencer's work, I am interested in how Golakai adopts and reframes elements of chick-lit generally and the chick-lit mystery in particular. Focusing on how both novels rewrite the chick-lit mystery from the perspective of an Afropolitan migrant detective, I demonstrate that Golakai introduces a new, liberatory ethic that questions the teleological impetus of both genres, the pursuit of the 'Happily Ever After' romantic relationship in chick-lit and the solving of the crime and restoration of order in crime fiction. In doing so, she also allows us to rethink seminal points of critique within consumerist readings of the notion of Afropolitanism that 'accuse Afropolitanism of culture commodification funded by the West' (Afolayan, 2017: 395).

*The Lazarus Effect* and *The Score* both focus on Vee Johnson, who has obtained a top-class degree in journalism and media from Columbia University in New York and works for the Cape Town-based magazines *Urban* and *City Chronicle*. Her assistant Chlöe, a white South African lesbian, over time also assumes the role of a close friend and advisor in love matters. Featuring a mixed-race investigative team and a lesbian detective, the novel, therefore, not only destabilises conventions of the heteronormative, white chick formula,<sup>6</sup> but also reconfigures the composition of the group of characters frequently found in African American, Asian or Latina chick-lit in which, according to Heike Mißler, the 'group identity addressed ... often does not mix with other ethnic groups either, but mostly stays within the targeted community' (2017: n.p.). In an example of metatextual reflection and narratorial endorsement of the text's genre transgressions, the narrative voice observes in *The Score*, using Chlöe as a focaliser: 'Batman and Robin. She wrinkled her nose. Hollywood had milked that franchise dry, and the whole superhero thing had never sparked her fancy. Why did it always have to be men anyway? Women, then. Famous, crime-fighting duos. Interracial ones. She went blank' (Golakai, 2015: 185).

This critical interrogation of the genre's archetypal white, heteronormative agenda is further echoed through a narrative focus on the viewpoints of multiple female characters who serve as focalisers in the texts, instead of the first-person voice of the dominant chick-lit form. These voices, including Vee, Chlöe, as well as South African women from diverse backgrounds who are both victims and perpetrators of crimes in the texts, offer a diversity of transnational femininities that leaves behind the conventional uniformity in social background of chick-lit characters. Golakai's novels, then, participate in the tradition of hybrid texts (see Galster, 2005: 227) that offer productive grounds to thematise the porosity of borders and the fundamental instability of national, but also transnational, metanarratives. These dynamics are central to understanding Golakai's refusal to adhere to more conservative renditions of chick-lit and crime fiction, particularly their archetypal teleological plot structure. Golakai disrupts the genres' progression towards resolution and closure or towards what Berlant calls 'the predictable comforts of the good-life genres' (2011: 2).

## Reimagining happiness

Classical iterations of crime fiction, Martin Horstkotte posits, 'yearn ... for a golden age of stability and happiness' (2004: 160). In other words, the structuring element of these crime novels, as in the romance, is the quest. As Carl Malmgren highlights, these '[q]uest narratives ... typically find closure in revelation, discovery, or disclosure', ultimately leading to the 'discovery of truth' (2010: 152). Similarly, common to the diverse manifestations and subgenres of the chick-lit novel is a standard plot trajectory that recounts 'the heroine's quest for happiness' (Mißler, 2017: n.p.). Happiness thus becomes the foremost enterprise for chick heroines within a formula that valorises neoliberal success:

The chick-lit formula is a blueprint for such narratives, as its heroines are doomed to follow conventional life goals such as the happy relationship, marriage, motherhood, and/or the successful career ... Criticism of this neoliberal discourse of the good life is made possible whenever the heroine struggles, fails, or points out the absurdities of her quest ... The heroine may struggle, but the choices she makes must remain within the boundaries of the formula (Mißler, 2017: n.p.).

Critical of the pervasive imperative 'to be happy', Ahmed (2010), in her feminist cultural study of emotion and affect, demonstrates how certain identities (such as the 'feminist killjoy') associated with deviations from the normative happiness script become read as causes of unhappiness, endangering the social order and threatening what she identifies as the 'happy objects' of the normative family, community and nation. For Ahmed, a more inclusive and revolutionary politics can only emerge from a valorisation of that which is rendered unhappy and irrelevant: 'The political will to be affected by unhappiness', she posits, 'could be rewritten as a political freedom. We would radicalize freedom as the freedom to be unhappy' (2010: 195).

Golakai's hybrid texts pave such alternative ways, which reroute the ubiquitous happiness trajectory. The narrative voice in *The Lazarus Effect* reveals, as the story unfolds, that Vee has just successfully re-emerged from a period of acute depression after a miscarriage followed by painful spousal estrangement and the eventual breakup with her fiancé, Titus Wreh, a 'Liberian-American hybrid' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). Like the typical heroine of mainstream chick-lit, Golakai's protagonist advances the idea of the self-made woman and financial independence as key to female agency: 'Semi-conscious, she watched as an engagement ended and job offers dried up, and friends stopped plying her with platitudes and financial tide-overs. Eventually self-preservation won out, and she hobbled back towards the light. A girl's gotta eat' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). This moment of rejuvenation may evoke the teleological drive towards happiness characteristic of the mainstream chick-lit plot, in which moments of struggle serve as necessary hurdles to make explicit the heroine's eventual maturation. Yet Vee's dedication to her job as an investigative journalist complicates the traditional growth trajectory of the chick-lit heroine.

From the beginning, Vee is introduced as an ambitious journalist with clear career goals. Moments of intimacy with her lover, Joshua, are regularly interrupted by calls from Vee's assistant, Chlöe. While Juliette Wells contends that '[t]he world of work in chick-lit is ... essentially window dressing: a backdrop to the real business of finding love' (2006: 55),

Golakai's technique of genre bending allows her to foreground in more depth Vee's professional identity, striking a more healthy balance between the two. Resembling some of the socially inept, stubborn and workaholic rule breakers of hard-boiled feminist fiction, Vee thrives on her job and unorthodox methods of detection: 'She loved being the only investigative journalist on the team, because it spelled solo missions. Most people couldn't handle having nothing but their own thoughts to keep those long hours from crushing their skulls in' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). It seems fitting, then, that Vee actively searches for more interesting stories than those assigned to her by persuading her boss in *The Lazarus Effect* to investigate the mysterious disappearance of Jacqueline Paulsen after noticing that the missing girl has appeared in one of her visions. In *The Score*, she starts investigating a murder case, initially without her superior's knowledge, and involves a hacker to receive information about a dubious business deal involving consulting firms, government agencies and corrupt government officials that she believes is the reason behind the murder. While her investment in her job thus seems to render secondary the search for a fulfilling romantic relationship in mainstream chick-lit, Vee's eventual success in solving the crimes in both novels appears to conform to the final resolution in the conventional whodunit. Yet, as I will show below, the idea of happiness as future end-point is repeatedly challenged by Vee's refusal to embrace the 'happiness of integration' (Ahmed, 2010: 138) commonly expected of migrants.

### **Beyond the Afropolitan 'hipster'**

Alongside her struggle for professional independence as a woman, Vee is frequently confronted with her outsider status as an African migrant in South Africa. While she is not directly affected by repeated flare-ups of 'xenophobic violence'<sup>7</sup> against African migrants on which she has written a major assignment in the past, her everyday life is marked by racism and her colleagues' ignorance about Liberia and West Africa. At first glance, however, Vee seems to represent the upward mobility and worldliness with 'African roots' commonly associated with the Afropolitan: She joined her ex-fiancé Titus on his quest of "'going home" to Africa, although since he had lived three-quarters of his life in the US, Vee wondered which home he meant and if he fully appreciated what it consisted of' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). With her education credentials that secure her employment at *Urban* and *City Chronicle*, Vee can afford a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle in Cape Town's trendy suburbs. And her enjoyment of 'the good life' (Berlant, 2011), with dates, drinks and dinners, seems to bear a strong resemblance to the 'hipster African experience' (Dabiri, 2014: n.p.) characteristic of consumerist appropriations of Afropolitanism.

A full engagement with the controversial debate on Afropolitanism, its exhaustion and near-death through commercial appropriations, and its subsequent, tentative rebirth as an ethics of mutuality, is not the focus of this article (see Coetzee 2016). It may be useful, however, to draw attention to its main points of critique here, which, as Susanne Gehrman notes, are '(1) its elitism/class bias, (2) its a-politicalness and (3) its commodification' (2016: 62). The notion's apparent elitism and celebration of commodity culture powerfully resonate with readings of chick-lit as an apolitical, commodified genre that, even in its non-Western forms, frequently papers over 'harsher and more differentiated historical realities which surround [the heroines]' (Ommundsen, 2011: 111). Celebratory, commercialised readings of 'Afropolitans' and their enjoyment of 'the good life' tend to eclipse the fundamentally

asymmetrical mobilities that govern their own lives as well as those of less upwardly mobile migrants: 'Migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea share chilling parallels with the Afropolitan: like the Afropolitan these Africans, too, cross-continent[sic], but in contrast to the Afropolitan narrative centred on Africa *rising*, these African's are drowning [sic]. Meanwhile, the Afropolitan comes and goes, continent hopping at leisure' (Dabiri, 2016: 106).

Dabiri's dichotomous framing of 'drowning' and 'rising' Africans, however, cannot easily accommodate Vee's experience in Cape Town. Even though she may embrace elements of the 'Afropolitan' lifestyle, she deviates from and consciously disrupts the straight lines of this particular happiness script. One notable incident demonstrates how she takes on the position of the 'melancholic migrant', a figure Ahmed analyses in her engagement with the common stereotypical figuration of 'the migrant'. The 'melancholic migrant' is 'not only stubbornly attached to difference, but [also] insists on speaking about racism [and other injuries], where such speech is heard as labouring over sore points' (Ahmed, 2010: 133). In a conversation with Chlöe and her boss, Vee compares being attacked by one of the suspects in a Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) corruption case to the rebels' treatment of civilians during the Liberian civil war, leaving her listeners suddenly uncomfortable, shuffling their feet and 'avoiding her eyes' (Golakai, 2015: n.p.). Throughout the two texts, Vee remembers and confronts others with her and others' past injuries, a practice that Ahmed (2010: 133) argues is commonly read as an impediment to migrants' own happiness as well as that of the nation. As a 'melancholic migrant' in the postapartheid context, Vee draws attention to the persistence and interrelated histories of injustice and suffering, emphasising the precarious position of migrants in South Africa. Vee's refusal to attach herself 'to a different happier object, one that can bring good fortune, such as the national game' (Ahmed, 2010: 133) or the idea of a happy, globetrotting Afropolitan, visibly undermines the happiness quest that structures both conventional crime and chick-lit fiction. If Vee embraces tenets of being 'of Africa and of other worlds at the same time' (Gikandi, 2011: 9), it is a critical Afropolitanism unmoored from its elitist associations and deeply inflected by her refusal to forget racism, xenophobia and the violence of the Liberian civil war. This divergence from traditional characteristics of the crime and chick-lit genres is equally discernible in Golakai's treatment of the love plot.

### **Love beyond the quest for the 'one and only'**

Despite the prominent portrayal of heterosexual sexuality in both novels, Golakai inflects the romance strand with unconventional nuances. Like their chick-lit predecessors, the two texts dramatise the chasm between Vee's personal and professional life that more than once results in painful confrontations with her lover, Joshua Allen, a successful broker at JP Morgan Chase and the erstwhile best friend of her ex-fiancé, Titus. The narratives' love plot differs from mainstream texts mainly in its engagement with the common trope of the search for the 'one and only'. Spencer identifies an obvious deviation from the 'focus on the "happily ever after" that the "singletons" in mainstream [Anglo-American] chick-lit desperately desire' in the South African context. According to her, chick-lit novels by black South African women examine 'the challenges that face women after they have settled down with "Mr Big" ..., and expose the anxieties, tensions, conflicts and fears that undercut



the idyllic suburban life' (Spencer, 2014: 95). Vee, in contrast, is still single and aspires to a more meaningful romantic relationship as well as sexual adventure:

Lately her mind was a lust-polluted cesspool, and, being somewhat single-minded, she knew it would affect her work. It was hard to give one thing solid attention when sex, the loss of it from her life, the acquisition of it again with any decent regularity, how much of it other happy bastards were having, all seemed to occupy a startling portion of her thoughts (Golakai, 2011: n.p.).

Happiness – as in some more conformist chick-lit narratives – is here associated with a fulfilling sex life that at the same time promises higher performance at work. Commenting on chick-lit's inherent paradoxes, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff note that in many novels, 'a discourse of freedom, liberation and pleasure seeking sits alongside an equally powerful suggestion that married heterosexual monogamy more truly captures women's real desires' (2006: 500). In contrast, Vee, in both novels, is involved with '[t]wo someones' (Golakai, 2015: n.p.). She becomes the lover of her long-time friend and admirer Joshua and at the same time continues to have romantic feelings for Titus. In her analysis of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Cecily Devereux suggests that monogamous coupling and reproduction, rather than marriage, are central to the ending of mainstream chick-lit: 'The trajectory that takes the heroine not to a wedding but to "monogamous coupling," not to an idea of wedded bliss but right to a baby, is pretty standard stuff in the chick-lit that has burgeoned since 1996' (2013: 218).

Even though *The Lazarus Effect* closes with Vee in Joshua's arms, Titus' reappearance after a long absence towards the end of the novel disrupts any thoughts about settling down and having children, the ultimate indicators of happiness in mainstream chick-lit, in the near future. In *The Score*, we find a similar dissolution of conformist romantic ideas of 'monogamous coupling' towards more promiscuous intimacies. This becomes most tangible in an episode in which images of the two men seem to blur into each other:

She imagined Titus's lips, trailing velvet down the verge behind her ear, fingers entangled with hers as he lowered his body to meet hers. Sometimes a memory of their lovemaking spooked her, so vivid she had to brace herself to keep balance. Then from nowhere, another image intruded: her lips in Joshua's curls, his mouth in the hollow of her neck as he stroked where the base of her spine curved into her bum (Golakai, 2015: 70).

In the final scene of *The Lazarus Effect*, romance is no longer constructed as a quest that has either been fulfilled or continues to be the object of desire. Rather, it becomes tied to the contingency of the moment: 'No questions. No hope, no expectations, unrealistic or otherwise ... It was also understood that she'd no more chosen him [Joshua] than she'd rejected Titus. All she knew was for now she was where she wanted to be' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). Undermining the conventional romance plot from this ambiguous vantage point, Golakai also subjects to critical scrutiny another critical plot element of the mainstream chick-lit novel: shopping and consumption.

## Shopping and the possibilities of 'unhappy objects'

Shopping and consumption, 'essential to chick lit heroines' self-conception' (Wells, 2006: 62), are prominent features of Vee's life, and central to her engagements with her best friend Connie Adeyemo, 'the successful owner of one of the most select West African boutiques in the Claremont area' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). Vee certainly exhibits qualities of Gqola's 'new South African woman' or Dabiri's Afropolitan shopper, yet she also inhabits a contradictory position as a post-feminist consumer. Alongside the conventional name-dropping of fashionable brands in the novels, Vee repeatedly teases Joshua about his brand consciousness, 'capitalist monstrosity of a car' and 'overpriced food' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). While endorsing chick-lit's focus on consumerist behaviours, the novels also point towards alternative means of post-feminist self-styling by narrating how Vee and Connie borrow clothes from each other for their dinner dates. Unlike in *Sex and the City*, where the 'act of consumption is offered as the solution for the void in the romantic imaginary' (Meyer, 2014: 433), Golakai tentatively positions the solution in different forms of 'family-making' that also reach beyond the usual circle of friends in chick-lit novels. In *The Score*, for example, Vee 'adopts' her neighbour's son Tristan, whose mother is too preoccupied with her own grief after a bereavement to look after the boy. Like Vee's dismissal of monogamous coupling, this alternative complicates the central plot devices of mainstream chick-lit.

In addition, the crime plot, particularly in *The Score*, undercuts an uncritical embrace of consumerism. Social inequalities and exclusions are frequently foregrounded in both novels, most notably in the narrator's rendition of 'the watcher's' account in *The Lazarus Effect*: a homeless boy who witnesses the disposal of Jacqui's body, reports the incident to the police, but is disbelieved because of his social background. Spencer notes that at the end of the novel "'the watcher" further problematizes the issue of missing children' (2014: 122) and, thus, defies the drive towards the restoration of the social order common to more orthodox renditions of the crime novel. While the novel does not negate the protagonist's enjoyment of commodity culture, it persistently foregrounds social ills that challenge the optimistic narrative of neoliberal self-making at the heart of many mainstream chick-lit texts.

Moreover, the maturation plot, frequently encountered in chick narratives, is counterpoised in Golakai's novels by a narrative focus on the heroine's panic attacks and visions resulting from her traumatic experiences as a child during the Liberian civil war. While chick-lit texts thematise the vulnerability of their heroines' bodies, especially in relation to normative beauty standards, they equally emphasise bodily control through dieting and self-styling through consumption. The NSAW also 'communicate[s] through the body a specific location within a global economy and a very controlled feminine esthetic whose transgression is ridiculed' (Gqola, 2016: 123). Vee's suffering from post-traumatic stress consistently causes panic attacks during which she can no longer control her body. Yet it is precisely her own bodily vulnerability that allows her to be more open to be affected by the suffering of others. During a visit to Mrs Paulsen's home in *The Lazarus Effect*, for instance, Vee observes how the mother of the missing girl tries to control her emotions, and ponders: 'Society extolled the virtues of strength, but nobody gave any solid advice on how to break down properly' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). Moreover, Vee 'remembered her own time of misfortune: unwashed body and swollen eyes, perfectly happy to marinate in her own stink

and pity were it not for those who loved her' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). Vee's reference to society's exaltation of strength and lack of advice on how to handle a breakdown correlates with Ahmed's account on the promise of happiness and the problematic inherent in 'the affective economy which associates joy with good things and pain with bad things' (2010: 215) that we need to move away from. Vee's recognition of shared physical and emotional vulnerability in this episode reminds us of the potential dangers of recovery; for, as Ahmed notes, '[t]o recover can be to re-cover, to cover over the causes of pain and suffering' (2010: 216). The very absence of re-covery from Vee's account here opens up the possibility for an ethics of mutuality that is not geared merely at those playing along with the illusion of happiness.

Later, when Vee visits the mother again, who is visibly shaken by her grief, she resists a spontaneous impulse to touch her: '[n]ot everyone received touch in a comforting way when tortured by grief, as she'd learnt in the past' (Golakai, 2011: n.p.). Again, Vee's empathetic response dramatises that possibility does not merely lie in the pursuit of happiness, but also in the openness to be affected by the unhappiness and suffering of others. It is this strand of the crime plot that most pointedly rewrites the alleged lack of political commitment and middle-class elitism that are associated with both conventional chick-lit and Afropolitan subjectivities. In doing so, the novels move towards a more complex conception of entangled identities across social classes and national boundaries and an idea of community, as formulated in Chielozona Eze's ethics of Afropolitanism, that 'is polychromatic, polymorphic, diverse and open' (2014: 245).

## Conclusion

Golakai successfully employs hybrid genres to challenge conventions of crime fiction and chick-lit alongside one-dimensional inscriptions of Afropolitanism in terms of glamorous transnational mobility and commodity culture. The persistent moments of genre disruption that permeate the novels de-centre a simplistic narrative of 'Africa rising', positioning Vee as a troubling, irreverent Afropolitan chick detective caught between loss and renewal, commodity culture and its rejection, displacement and upward mobility, empowerment and subordination. Vee's Afropolitanism is not solely driven by the promises of consumer culture or the happy objects of the normative family and nation, but is also a way of being in the world that is open to being affected by the unhappiness and suffering of others. It is in this sense that Golakai's chick-lit mysteries write into being a new, liberatory Afropolitan ethic that contains rather than erases the paradoxical impulses of post-femininity.

The texts examined here join a body of work by women crime writers across the globe that increasingly examines the position of women detectives within post-feminist cultures. The chick noir through its recasting of the femme fatale of traditional hard-boiled crime fiction, as Kennedy contends, 'offers female readers solidarity in anger and anxiety' about ongoing inequalities women face in multiple spheres, 'problems that are so long-standing and so socially entrenched, there sometimes seems to be no escape' (2017: 37). For the group of women in Makholwa's *Black Widow Society*, the most viable response to postapartheid's ubiquitous culture of misogyny seems to be to hire a hitman to kill their abusive partners and husbands. Golakai's chick-lit mysteries, while equally critical of the enduring nature of patriarchal structures, do not foreclose the possibilities for romance. But rather than

situating these within chick-lit's conventional framework of 'happily-ever-after', they centre on a 'melancholic migrant' detective who persistently undercuts the expectations and certainties of generic formulas. In doing so, Golakai's genre bending moves towards Berlant's notion of the 'impasse' (2011: 199), a space in which life becomes unmoored from the certainties enshrined in generic formulas. It is this space of the 'impasse' – echoing postapartheid's troubled socio-political dynamics and the precarious situation of African migrants in the country – that in the novels' vision gives rise to alternative social imaginaries and constructions of femininities which resist both patriarchal and generic boundaries.

## Notes

1. *The Lazarus Effect* was shortlisted for the prominent Sunday Times Fiction Prize in 2011, shortlisted for the University of Johannesburg Debut Prize, longlisted for the Wole Soyinka Prize and was published in the UK by Cassava Republic in 2016.

2. Beginning in the 1920s, American hard-boiled fiction by authors such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett is traditionally understood as a response to the gentility of 'Golden Age' crime writing. Mainly featuring grim urban settings, rather than the country house, hard-boiled writing is characterised by violent, action-driven plots in which a tough, 'private eye' investigator chases gangsters and criminals (Pepper, 2010: 140).

3. Some of these authors, writing in English and Afrikaans, are Sally Andrew, Karin Brynard, Amanda Coetzee, June Drummond, Barbara Erasmus, Joanne Hitchens, Jenny Hobbs, Margaret von Klemperer, Sara Lotz, Jassy Mackenzie, Chanette Paul, Sue Rabie, Gillian Slovo, Jane Taylor and Irna van Zyl (Nicol, 2016).

4. For Genz, '[p]ostfemininity cannot be conceptualized along a sharp split between feminism and femininity, agency and victimization. ... Postfeminist femininity presents multiple layers of female identification that oscillate between subject and object, victim and perpetrator' (2009: 26).

5. Victoria Kennedy positions chick-noir novels at the intersection between chick-lit and noir crime fiction. These novels, according to Kennedy, rewrite the stereotypical character of the *femme fatale* of the classic hard-boiled novel. While equally tough and scrupulous, women characters in the chick-noir defy one-dimensional readings, appearing 'more sympathetic, with more understandable motives' (Kennedy, 2017: 32). See also: Corrigan (2005) and Stasio (2005).

6. Makholwa, according to Spencer (2014: 105), only 'hints' at lesbian love in her texts.

7. Since the 1990s a series of violent pogroms directed against migrants from other African countries has taken place in South Africa, involving murder and rape alongside the destruction of homes and businesses (see Fasselt, 2016, for a discussion of the problematic label of 'xenophobia' and engagements with the theme in contemporary South African crime fiction).

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