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Holmes, D orcid.org/0000-0001-9079-3582 (2022) Women's Fiction in Postfeminist France: Léonora Miano, Camille Laurens, and Chick-Lit or Romances urbaines. Nottingham French Studies, 61 (3). pp. 294-306. ISSN 0029-4586

https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2022.0361

WOMEN'S FICTION IN POSTFEMINIST FRANCE: LEONORA MIANO, CAMILLE LAURENS, AND CHICK-LIT OR *ROMANCES URBAINES*

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By a 'postfeminist sensibility',[1] cultural theorists mean a normative model of female identity that pervades contemporary culture, at least in the global North, and reworks the advances won by feminism to serve the interests of a neoliberalism that is also patriarchal. The emphasis is on individualism, choice and agency, which effectively obscures the structural inequalities of class, sex and ethnicity; the imperative is to discipline and optimize the self, both body and mind, to produce 'upbeat, resilient'[2] subjects who can contribute fully and willingly to the economy through production, reproduction and consumption. The word 'sensibility' suggests a diffuse, deeply internalized affective state, a structure of feeling of which we may or may not be conscious but that shapes our sense of self and our interactions with others. The fictions we consume for pleasure can play a significant role in transmitting and reinforcing this model of selfhood, but they can also render its normative function visible and challenge its terms. In this article I want to examine how a postfeminist sensibility informs contemporary fiction written by and, it is safe to assume, mainly read by women. How do three quite different novels of the decade beginning in 2010 portray and process life in a postfeminist climate – that is, in a world where real feminist gains in professional opportunities and social and sexual freedoms have widened the scope of women's lives, but are also insidiously repurposed to serve the goals of neoliberalism and of patriarchy? In a high-tech culture where the ubiquity of screens and social media make the performance of identity, and notably gender identity, a constant preoccupation, and where women are called upon to be at once professionally productive, time-defyingly lovely, and domestically and

sexually proficient, how does fiction written by and for women negotiate issues of self-fulfilment and relationships?

In the highly mediatized, visually oriented culture of the twenty-first century, fictions are made and consumed to a large extent on screens, both large and small. And yet in this post-everything world there are also significant continuities, and one of these is the importance of books in (particularly, though not solely) women's lives. For centuries, since the days of oral culture and markedly since the birth of the novel, women have used the story form to work through and share difficult as well as positive aspects of female experience, in a manner that provides the pleasures of narrative patterning and escape into imagination. This is still the case: literature remains a significant cultural and commercial force in France, as the Ministry of Culture's annual surveys show,[3] and women make up a clear majority of its readers, especially in the case of fiction. The three texts to be discussed here, each of them widely sold and read, share certain thematic features that mean they could justly be described as postfeminist stories for a postfeminist market. They are taken deliberately from different points in the hierarchical field of literary production and hence address different, if overlapping, readerships: Camille Laurens's *Celle que vous croyez* (2016) is a 'high' literary novel from a prize-winning member of the Académie Goncourt, whilst Marie Vareille's *Je peux très bien me passer de toi* (2015) is a popular romance aimed explicitly, as its foreword announces, at 'les filles qui aiment la chick-lit de qualité'.[4] Léonore Miano's *Blues pour Élise* (2010) is the result of a very literary novelist's desire to reach a wider readership with a novel 'à la portée de tous'.[5] Each of them shapes into story form the tensions and contradictions of living as a woman in the postfeminist culture of contemporary France, with varying degrees of lucidity and dissent.

***Celle que vous croyez* (2016)**

Camille Laurens belongs within this discussion both because of her 'high' literary status – evidence of the presence of postfeminist themes across the high to lowbrow spectrum – and because her work articulates clearly a view of sexual difference that has particular currency in France, and that coalesces well with postfeminist values. A published novelist since 1991, Laurens has seen her work acknowledged by a series of prizes, including the Prix Femina and a nomination for the Goncourt, and by appointment to the most prestigious prize juries (the Femina from 2007 to 2019, currently the Goncourt). She has been a columnist for several of France's major newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Monde des livres*, *Libération*, *L'Humanité*) and is, all told, recognized as a significant literary figure. Her work is largely written in the auto-fictional mode that dominates literary writing in contemporary France: though her narrators share name and biography with the author, the texts claim fictional status and thus blur the boundary between lived and imagined experience. The place of heterosexual romance in women's lives is by no means Laurens's only theme, but it is central to many of her novels as the titles suggest – *Romance* (1992), *Dans ces bras-là* (2000), *L'Amour, roman* (2003), *Romance nerveuse* (2010) – as well as to *Celle que vous croyez* (2016), the novel on which I want to mainly focus here.

Laurens's earlier novels play interestingly with the powerful archetype of the boy-meets-girl love story, its place in female culture from fairy stories to contemporary romance series, and its structural importance in shaping women's expectations and desires. Laced with irony, deeply self-reflexive about the relationship between heterosexual love, language and literary form, these texts nonetheless insist on sexual difference as the primary form of all difference ('le sentiment profond du Pas-moi; l'intelligence de l'autre'[6]), hence as essential to both emotional fulfilment and creative inspiration. Laurens eloquently voices a particularly French suspicion of Anglo-American feminism's tendency to downplay difference and promote the possibility of a comradely, respectful relationship between the sexes: to see man-

woman relations in terms of 'sympathie fraternelle' rather than erotic love and seduction means the destruction of 'ce que nous sommes […] pour nous fondre et nous confondre en un magma informe', and expresses a 'feinte ignorance de l'altérité qui rend tout péniblement uniforme et faussement familier'.[7] This insistence on sexual difference as foundational of all human otherness, and on mutual desire and seduction as the primary form of man-woman relations, forms a recurring thread in French culture,[8] resurfacing recently in the opposition to #MeToo feminism expressed in the famous letter to *Le Monde* (January 2018), signed by a hundred high-profile French women, which attacked a feminism that 'hated men', and defended 'la liberté d'importuner' as 'indispensable à la liberté sexuelle' for both sexes. The celebration of heterosexual relations as the pleasurable encounter between two free individuals, with its accompanying erasure of collective power relations, fits well with neoliberal postfeminism's prescriptive model of the sexually assured and available female subject.

In her more recent work, Laurens's take on intersexual relations grows darker, because her autofictional heroines are ageing, while masculine desire as she depicts it is aroused only by that vibrantly youthful female body equally celebrated by a highly visual and consumerist culture. *Romance nerveuse* (2010), set among 'les ravages de la société post-moderne',[9] already has its middle-aged narrator fall for a man a decade younger, her intense desire for him also inspiring her desire to write, and surviving all his bullying, exploitative treatment of her as a woman whose age reduces her sexual capital. In *Celle que vous croyez* (2016), the themes of ageing and desire are amplified. Though late in the novel the primary narrator is revealed to be an author named Camille whose life maps precisely onto that of Laurens, the main narrator is her avatar Claire Millecam, a successful writer and academic, divorced and in her late 40s. Treated with casual contempt by a younger lover, Jo, Claire creates a fake social media profile under the false identity of a beautiful twenty-four-year-old,

and thus begins an Internet love affair with Chris, a photographer in his thirties, subsequently meeting him as her real self. Chris takes himself for an *artiste maudit,* but Claire herself recognizes that he is rather a 'genre de beau mec narcissique et creux, intéressé et lâche'.[10] However, her need to be desired by him survives all his contemptuous exploitation of her as an older woman not worthy of his attention, and even his violence: 'j'étais devenue indésirable et l'homme ne pouvait pas le supporter, c'est ce qui le rendait violent, d'avoir désiré l'indésirable' (p. 178). The novel intricately layers fictions created by the characters with its own primary fiction, emphasizing the theme of identity and love as performance and making it hard to distinguish what 'happens' from what is imagined, but at the heart of its postmodern play lies an abusive relationship between a boorish, arrogant man and a middle-aged woman who dares to assert her desire for him. Chris's misogynistic view of ageing women is represented as hegemonic: 'c'est horrible tu le vois dans la rue tu le sens t'es vieille les regards me traversent ou m'attaquent dégages casse-toi tu pues la mort' (p. 14), as the protagonist rages in the clinic to which her post-romance breakdown brings her.

Celle que vous croyez is clever and complex but disturbingly complicit with the androcentrism and individualism of postfeminist culture. The heroine's status (university lecturer and published author) and her financial independence show that certain equalities have been won, and the novel burns with a feminist anger that the world still nonetheless seems to belong to men: 'le monde leur appartient plus qu'à nous – le temps, l'espace, la rue, la ville, le travail, la pensée…' (pp. 43–4). Claire is acutely aware of the complex masquerade demanded to meet the standards of desirable femininity, detailing to her therapist the expensive, sometimes painful treatments and products this involves, expressing the desire to be 'aimée pour moi-même […]. Sans la gym, sans les fringues, sans le rouge à lèvres. Qu'il me rencontre, moi, et pas l'objet artificiellement créé de son attente' (p. 65). And yet the novel also displays a profound internalization of the idea that female identity must be

validated by male desire. Though she has a satisfying, high-status career and a young teenage daughter (the care of whom seems rarely if ever to intrude on her relationships with men), whenever Chris withdraws desire Claire feels herself 'meurtrie, terrassée, vieille' (p. 96); despite his 'goujaterie' (p. 167), Chris as sexual partner represents 'la preuve que j'existais' (p. 80), and he becomes the wellspring of her creative inspiration: 'Plus d'homme à toucher, plus de livre à écrire' (p. 195). Once 'exilée, chassée du jardin des délices' (p. 195), Claire/Camille wants only to die, and thus fulfil the unspoken imperative of a misogynist society to the post-menopausal woman: as Chris literally tells her 'Va mourir!' (p. 30).

The portrayal of masculinity both celebrates the seductive force of male otherness and represents the male sex as more or less uniformly injurious to female wellbeing. Virtually all the male protagonists – Jo, Chris, Claire's ex-husband, the unnamed collective 'ils' of Claire's diatribe – are united in a misogynist recoil from ageing women. This implies an essential, irrevocable bias in male sexuality that relieves men of responsibility for their own behaviour, and makes the successful performance of femininity, however 'artificiellement créé', a necessary part of being a woman, at least once early youth is past. It is as if male sexuality were intrinsically hostile to women's interests and yet essential to their appetite for life. And the narrator's resentful but unchallenging acknowledgment of sexual inequality is also generalized to women as a sex, since other women – who might serve as a microcosm of collective feminism – are largely absent from the text other than as younger rivals. Only at the novel's end, in the final version of her story spoken by Claire to her therapist, is there a brief moment of relationship between a man and a woman that is outside the terms of erotic exchange: Claire and a second Chris, a filmmaker named Christian, share a cigarette outside the clinic and laugh together 'comme des fous' (p. 202). But the moment evaporates as the epilogue belongs to Claire's ex-husband, Paul Millecam, now about to marry the very young woman whose identity was used to create Claire's youthful, seductive online persona. Paul is

equally, angrily dismissive of his wife and of the 'grande blonde aux yeux perçants' (p. 210) who is clearly Laurens herself ('Camille Morand, quelque chose comme ça. Sinon, je sais plus trop, je crois qu'elle… ah si! C'est rien, c'est un écrivain' (p. 211).

What the reader retains is the sense of a world divided into antagonistic sexes but within which the primary imperative in a woman's life is to be desired and to feel desire, the (hetero)sexual dynamic being the fount of all other creative activity. Women's response to misogyny is couched in wholly individual terms. As Claire retreats into therapy and writing, only the transmutation of pain into personal creativity, of which the novel itself is evidence, is proposed as a form of redemption.[11]

Je peux très bien me passer de toi

It is this absence of bonds between women as well as its inventive, self-reflexive literary form that distinguishes Laurens's novel from more popular twenty-first century women's fictions, notably chick-lit. Chick-lit, as the (somewhat patronizing) label suggests - though the French Academy have proposed the more properly French term of *romance urbaine*[12] – is the postfeminist genre *par excellence*. Its Ur-text is *Bridget Jones' Diary* (published in 1996 and in French translation in 1998), whose lovably imperfect heroine is torn between on the one hand the ideal of independent, stylish singledom and on the other the irresistible attraction of some very sexy, if sexist, men, as well as the glistening prospect of happy coupledom. Through the book, then its film adaptation (and sequels), Bridget became an international icon of contemporary womanhood, including in France – and France, or more precisely Paris, went on to play a privileged role within the chick-lit genre as the city most associated with romance and chic. More recently some French authors have adopted its conventions to produce home-grown versions – Marie Vareille's *Je peux très bien me passer de toi* (2015) is one such.[13] It is a skilful, very readable exercise in the genre.

Chick-lit novels feature heroines who take for granted their equal right to professional success and to the lifestyle of privileged singledom that was, not so long ago, a male preserve – including casual sex and lavish consumption. Chloe and Constance, the two main protagonists of Vareille's novel, are well-qualified young women in high-prestige private sector jobs: each works in some form of marketing and aims to become what Constance defines in her diary as 'une brillante cadre dirigeante'.[14] The contrast between them provides some of the novel's verve and humour: while Constance struggles to live up to the model of fast-living, confident, sophisticated young femininity and takes refuge in devotion to Jane Austen, dreaming of Mr Darcy as she spends her evenings pyjama-clad, engrossed in an Austen novel or its film adaptation, Chloe fully lives the 'Can-Do' ideal.[15] Already a high-flying executive in a very twenty-first-century field ('je fais du conseil en stratégie dans un grand cabinet'[16]), she earns and spends a high salary, in part on gym subscriptions and expensive clothes, and engages in a great deal of alcohol-fuelled sex including with men she picks up in bars.

But the narrative hook in chick-lit is the contradiction between, on the one hand, young women's acute awareness of the social injunction to perform sexual equality and independence, and on the other their reluctant attraction to conventionally virile men, and a powerful desire for coupledom and children. Both Chloe and Constance are intensely aware of the imperative to perform the role of smart, sexually emancipated city girls or 'filles cool' (p. 14), the former excelling in the role and the latter deploring her inability to do so. Each, however, is really in search of 'l'Homme de leur vie' (p. 24), and their mutual friend Charlotte, happily married and pregnant for the second time, inspires in them a repressed envy and a sense of the inadequacy of a lifestyle that Chloe mentally defines in terms of its key accessories: 'un smartphone, un tampax, une capote, un shot' (p. 19). Both fear that they

are living ‘une vie qui défile tous les jours un peu plus vite et qu’on est en train de rater’ (p. 19).

Conforming to a postfeminist ideal of femininity is thus acknowledged to be a demanding and conflicted task, and the book’s humour plays on the masquerade required to perform it successfully. Constance, whose failure to do so has left her stuck in ‘NoSex Land’, signs up for a ‘cours de séduction’ that starts, like a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, with the participants acknowledging out loud the shame of their failure to comply with the rules of the heterosexual game: ‘je suis célibataire et c’est de ma faute’ (p. 74). Part of the pleasure of chick-lit lies in its address to a knowing, self-aware readership who can respond with an ironic smile of recognition to the situations portrayed. Thus the comedy of the expensive training course in seduction, which promises to transform the timid Constance along with her classmates into a confident sex-goddess capable of seducing any man (‘maqué, marié, amoureux d’une autre, homo, voire tout ça à la fois’ (p. 77) in under seven minutes, relies on the reader’s familiarity with the trope of the ‘makeover’, or the instructions commonly found in women’s magazines and social media pages on how to re-invent the self through a re-styling of both appearance and behaviour. But though the learned performance of seductive femininity is treated satirically, it is also shown to work: Constance learns the rules and is rewarded with a man. Meanwhile Chloe’s over-investment in her role as a ‘fille cool’ is resolved by a sex-free retreat to the country where she meets ‘l’Homme de sa vie’, in the very French shape of a gruff but tender winegrower. Both women achieve their happy ending by reconciling the conflicting demands of ‘Can-Do’ femininity and romantic love.

Can some vestigial spirit of feminism itself be felt, in a novel published and widely read just two years before #Balancetonporc exploded on the French scene? There is the importance granted to supportive female bonds – also characteristic of the genre as a whole: unlike Laurens’s singular subjectivity, here two women’s stories and voices interweave and

extend into a network of largely benevolent secondary female characters, including some older women, as well as an assumed community of readers. The tongue-in-cheek treatment of the imperative to police and optimize the performance of feminine identity gestures towards a shared lucidity. The assumption of the primacy of heterosexuality in human relations, which chick-lit largely shares with the Laurens text, is at least mildly questioned by the inclusion of a sympathetic lesbian character whose sexual attraction to Chloe the latter misreads as simply warm friendship because she associates desire only with men. Chloe apologizes – 'J'aurais dû me rendre compte… comprendre […] j'ai été trop lâche et autocentrée pour régler la situation' (p. 298) – and does her best to maintain the friendship. Overall, though, true to generic norms, as Chloe and Constance each end their stories in the arms of 'l'homme de leur vie', the novel subordinates ironic exposure of postfeminist normativity to the pleasure of a happy ending. If the road to female self-fulfilment (unlike in the past) must pass through success in the professional and sexual marketplace, it still leads solely and inexorably to heterosexual coupledom, material affluence and the foundation of a family.

Blues pour Élise

The underlying question here is the extent to which pleasurable fictions with wide appeal can process and question postfeminist culture rather than only reflect and implicitly endorse its values. My third text, Leonora Miano's *Blues pour Élise,* makes a stronger case for this possibility, since its author adopts the generic conventions of the chick-lit genre and deploys them to quietly political ends. Miano is the Black French author of several prize-winning 'literary' novels and essays that deal with the colonial past as well as the contemporary experience of those she names *Afropéens.* In 2010, with *Blues pour Élise,* she aimed to address a wide, popular readership with 'un roman sciemment conçu pour être à la portée de tous'.[17]

The novel adheres closely to the norms of the genre. It is structured around a female friendship group – les 'Bigger than Life', composed of Akasha, Amahoro, Malaika and Shale. Their intersecting stories, along with those of Shale's mother Élise and her sister Estelle, make up the novel, with the friendship itself, and its supportive as well as enjoyable function, playing an important role in each individual life. The young women all demonstrate social mobility, having moved on through education and employment from childhoods in the *banlieue* to independent lives in the city: like Vareille's Chloe and Constance, and indeed Laurens's Claire, they are Parisians for whom fashion, style, music, eating out and dating are taken-for-granted pleasures, and appearance, body size, the negotiation of how to be a modern woman are everyday preoccupations. 'Les Bigger than Life étaient intelligentes, financièrement autonomes, belles, chacune à sa manière.'[18] Each is involved in a heterosexual love relationship: Akasha tries speed-dating on the grounds that – as both Laurens's and Vareille's heroines would agree – 'Tous les moyens étaient bons pour trouver l'amant' (p. 21). The narrative arc leads through insecurities, misunderstandings, separations and reunions to a happy ending that – true to chick-lit form – sees all but one of the six major protagonists in a fulfilling relationship.

However, whereas chick-lit has largely been set in a homogenously white, middle-class world, Miano's characters are all Black, descendants of France's colonial past, so that their positioning as self-assured women fully at home in the capital is itself an affirmation of Afro-French identity as an integral dimension of contemporary France. Elsewhere in her writing, Miano's theorization of Franco-Caribbean and Franco-African identity is notable for its combination of realism and optimism: she defines it as an 'identité frontalière […] née de la douleur' but now occupying an 'espace cicatriciel'. A scar, though, she adds, is not the wound itself: 'elle est la nouvelle ligne de vie qui s'est créée par-dessus. Elle est le champ des possibles les plus insoupçonnés.'[19] The painful legacy of colonialism is present in the novel,

in the current of racism that runs through the characters' lives, but the scars as new lifelines also harmonize with chick-lit's characteristic optimism.

The postfeminist women of *Blues pour Élise* negotiate conflicting images of what it means to be fulfilled as a woman, as well as their own conflicting desires for self-affirmation and for validation through love. For example, one relationship founders briefly when Amahoro, released from inhibition by pleasure as she makes love with Michel, engages in a 'fantaisie impromptue' that Michel finds erotically thrilling but at the same time threatening ('il y avait également le fait qu'il ne se croie pas capable de rivaliser avec cette inventivité-là', p. 70) and at odds with his unconscious but powerful assumptions about good women's sexual behaviour. How to express desire, the balancing of sexual agency with the gendered regulation of sexuality is central territory for chick-lit as for Miano's novel.

At the same time, the protagonists' identities as Black women alter and enrich the generic script in interesting ways, and not only by highlighting the white-as-norm nature of most chick-lit novels, and extending the genre's address to Black readers. The contingent, non-absolute nature of gender norms is underlined because 'les Bigger-Than-Life' deal simultaneously with those of two cultures. The novel opens with Akasha determining to reject the unspoken imperative of her Martiniquaise/Cameroonian heritage to be 'la femme poteau-mitan' (p. 13), or she who provides material and emotional support for the entire household: 'Fini de marcher sur les traces de ses aïeules, pour n'être, sur une rive ou l'autre de l'océan, que madone ou bête de somme' (p. 14). Rather, she will face the world equipped with her 'nouvelle féminité sauvage et postmoderne' (p. 28): a gym-toned, slender body and a confident but non-aggressive attitude that will 'séduire des hordes de bobos [qui] verraient en elle, à la fois le reflet d'eux-mêmes et une altérité conviviale' (pp. 28–9). As so often in chick-lit, irony plays around the ideal of well-disciplined body, assertive yet compliant personality proposed by the dominant culture, though Akasha's attempts to conform to the

ideal are not, unlike in Vareille's novel, rewarded by the love of an equally ideal man – she is the only one of the group to end the novel single.

Standards of physical beauty are complicated by genetic inheritance as well as by conflicting aesthetic standards. By nature, Malaika and Akasha both have the plump, rounded bodies appreciated in their parents' cultures but scorned in France where 'la femme devait avoir l'air d'une petite chose fragile' (p. 81). Akasha diets and exercizes to conform to the local criteria whilst Malaika renounces the battle to 'entrer dans la norme' and releases herself from the slimness imperative that she terms 'la burqa de la femme occidentale' (p. 79). At the hairdressers', women clash over the question of how to deal with frizzy hair: is straightening a form of alienation? Is cultivating an Afro a gesture of authenticity or an ill-judged search for 'la pureté identitaire' (p. 81)? Managing and moulding the body, and an intense concern with self-presentation, are part of postfeminist femininity as of chick-lit fiction; the dimension of ethnicity, though, illuminates both the relativism of aesthetic norms, and their wider political meanings.

Situating the 'love, shopping and friendship' plot in an ethnic minority context also has consequences for the representation of men. The women protagonists are 'postfeminist' in their everyday assertion of strength, equality and mutual support without explicitly translating this into collective political terms. But if they reject all deference to men, they also take account of the postcolonial disadvantage shared by both sexes: 'ce n'était pas très gentil de tourner le dos à des hommes qui subissaient constamment des contrôles au faciès, n'étaient perçus que comme des corps taillés pour le sport ou la maçonnerie' (pp. 25–6). The 'sympathie fraternelle' that Laurens rejects as the denial of sexual otherness is very much a part of heterosexual relationships in this novel – a fact reinforced by the novel's own occasional lending of its *style indirect libre* focalization to male characters, merging the third-person narrative voice with that of the protagonist to give a direct sense of the latter's

thoughts and feelings, as with Michel's reaction to his lover's 'fantaisie impromptue': 'Un truc dingue, impossible d'autoriser n'importe quelle femme à vous toucher de la sorte, trop risqué, trop déstabilisant' (pp. 69–70). Masculinity here is more diverse and treated more empathetically than in Laurens's or Vareille's novels. Michel confronts his own issues of sexual confidence and learned assumptions about female sexuality. His white friend Gaëtan, who grew up in Sub-Saharan Africa (the country is unspecified), feels a romantic nostalgia for all things African and a corresponding dislike of France that contrasts with the sense of composite identity experienced by his Black friends, but if his desire to 'enfermer tous les Noirs dans une africanité ancestrale' (p. 63) irritates Michel and alienates girlfriends, their mockery and that of the text is gentle because based on sympathy for his sense of split identity. Africa is home for Gaëtan, unlike for his French-born contemporaries. And if heterosexual relationships form the novel's central focus, there is also a taken-for-granted recognition that they are not the only mode of romance or erotic attraction in human lives. Akasha is still reeling from the loss of the ideal lover ('l'ultime frangin', p. 31) who left her because 'l'ultime préférait les garçons' (p. 31), and the story of Shale's gay young cousin Baptiste and his coming-out in the macho world of the *banlieue* provides a significant counterpoint to the narratives of the women's lives. Baptiste, known as Bogus (*beau gusse*, or *beau gosse*) has to contend both with the emphatically heterosexual masculinity of his friends,[20] and with his mother's strict Christianity. It is when he falls in love that he feels obliged to reveal the truth to his mother and take provisional refuge with Shale, whose own issues of identity and relationships both parallel and contrast with his own.

Miano's novel then is informed by the insistent emphasis on intersectionality that characterizes postfeminism in its positive sense, as a contemporary iteration of feminist thinking and feminist politics. Sex and race intersect in the identities of the central female protagonists, as well as in those of the men they love. Restrictive gender roles play out in the

lives of both sexes and must be negotiated for the fulfilment of both heterosexual and same-sex desire. The novel's intersectional perspective extends too to the question of ageing in a cultural climate that glorifies youth. The theme of female ageing appears through the character of Shale's mother, the Élise of the title, whose backstory of pregnancy caused by rape, and consequent social exclusion from her own community, throws a positive light on the more liberal, cosmopolitan context of her daughters' lives. In a classic mirror scene, often used to represent a woman's confrontation with her own ageing body, Élise sees in her slackening flesh an 'avachissement' (p. 163) and an 'écroulement' (p. 164), both words that suggest decline and loss. But she also recognizes and accepts herself in this body that shows the marks of time: 'C'était sa cicatrice intime qui se voyait là' (p. 164). True to the novel's broadly optimistic portrayal of men, Élise in middle age has found a wise and sensitive younger lover whose steadfast desire helps to reconcile her to the 'matière fripée' (p. 164) of a body that no longer conforms to the youthful ideal to which women are asked to aspire, but that literally embodies her trajectory through life, scars and all. Élise's story ends happily, her renewed confidence in herself enabling her to tell her story and thus reconcile with an estranged daughter: the novel's final words – apart from the 'Bonus' that acts as an epilogue – are hers, speaking of her daughter Shale: 'je crois qu'elle sera heureuse. Et moi aussi' (p. 186).

Indeed some degree of happy ending is granted to each of the characters, in line with the upbeat closure that characterizes the chick-lit genre, and also in tune with Miano's overall optimism about 'Afropean' identity: each of the women's lives moves forward in the course of the novel towards a stronger sense of self and the perspective or reality of a happy relationship. The note of ironic humour that plays around gender norms in chick-lit is also maintained, culminating in the novel's 'Bonus' or epilogue, entitled 'NEWBIAN LUV Let's Barack Our Lives'. Michel and Amahoro move in together and hold a flat-warming party just

after Obama's election. The women are elated, less by the victory of a Black President than by Obama's evident passion and respect for his strong, charismatic wife, and the model of 'Newbian love' this represents. The narrative point of view is that of Michel, the male protagonist most alert to the threat posed to male privilege by women's embrace of the independence and agency that – however open to appropriation for more conservative ends – are also the real gains of feminism. From his perspective, Obama is 'un très mauvais exemple', a too-perfect model of Black masculinity who threatens men's historic sense of their own primacy: 'Maintenant, les frangines exigeraient d'être traitées ainsi. […] En un mot, les hommes noirs – et eux seuls – devraient cesser d'être des hommes' (pp. 191–2). The novel's dominant perspective though is that of the women: Michel's anxieties are registered and acknowledged, but the overriding tone of the ending celebrates rather than condemns the shift in power relations between the sexes. What Michel fears points the way to a vision of a postfeminist future in the positive sense of the term: 'les frangines […] ne se cacheraient pas derrière les hommes, comme leurs aînées l'avaient fait pendant des générations. C'était du passé' (p. 192).

Conclusion

Miano's self-aware take on contemporary women's fiction illuminates some of the novel's functions in a postfeminist climate. All three texts acknowledge the specific difficulties of performing femininity in a culture that insinuates its contradictory imperatives into the most intimate spaces of personal life and makes conformity to narrowly defined aesthetic and behavioural criteria the condition for social and emotional rewards. For readers they provide the pleasure of recognition, which constitutes a validation of experience and fosters a certain lucidity. The three novels differ though in the extent to which they elucidate and challenge the culture they portray. *Celle que vous croyez* captures brilliantly the possibilities presented

by social media for the fictionalization of identity, and the pleasures, anxieties and deceptions this can produce. Laurens's novel also powerfully conveys the sense that feminism's gains in terms of women's social, economic and sexual freedom have been integrated into a culture still shaped by male privilege and male desire. Her novel affirms women's sexuality as a creative force and measures the contradictions of heterosexual desire in a situation of sexual inequality. Yet at the same time *Celle que vous croyez* reflects uncritically postfeminism's emphasis on individual agency rather than collective resistance to male privilege and its damaging effects, remaining fatalist in its representation of an essentially phallocentric world. Marie Vareille's entertaining *romance urbaine* gestures ironically to young women's shared lucidity about the pressures of postfeminist life, but then cheerfully fantasizes a happy ending within the terms of a culture that takes for granted the advances won by political feminism yet continues to envisage female fulfilment exclusively in the traditional terms of sexual appeal, marriage and maternity. It is the third novel, Miano's *Blues pour Élise*, that through its intersectional focus relativizes and thus denaturalizes normative models of gender – and reveals the surprisingly liberatory potential of chick-lit as a quintessentially postfeminist literary genre.

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[1] Rosalind Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On', *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 20:6 (2017), 606–26.
[2] Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism', p. 618.
[3] For the 2021 survey of reading practices in France see <https://centrenationaldulivre.fr/donnees-cles/les-francais-et-la-lecture-en-2021> [accessed 2 September 2021]. Even with a reduction in reading attributed to the pandemic, 81% of the French self-identify as readers and women continue to read more, and notably more fiction, than men. The plethora of literary prizes, the popularity of book-based websites such as Babelio and Goodreads, the regular mediatization of the book in programmes such as *La Grande Librairie* (running since 2008) all testify to the vitality of literary culture in France.
[4] Marie Vareille, *Je peux très bien me passer de toi* (Paris: Éditions Charleston, 2015), p. 5. Further references will be given in the main text.
[5] Leonora Miano, *Habiter la frontière* (Paris: L'Arche, 2012), p. 139.

[6] Camille Laurens, *Dans ces bras-là* (Paris: P.O.L., 2000), p. 199.
[7] Laurens, *Dans ces bras-là*, p. 199.
[8] Beauvoir acknowledges this fear that a world of sexual equality will mean a world of tedious sameness in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. 'Entre autres, rien ne me parait plus contestable que le slogan qui voue le monde nouveau à l'uniformité, donc à l'ennui.' She goes on to reassure her readers that 'il demeurera toujours entre l'homme et la femme certaines différences', particularly in the domain of sexuality – that women will always have 'une sensualité, une sensibilité singulière'. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1976), II, p. 661.
[9] Camille Laurens, *Romance nerveuse* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), p. 105.
[10] Camille Laurens, *Celle que vous croyez* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 2016), p. 184. Further references will be given in the main text.
[11] *Celle que vous croyez* has also been made as a film, directed by Safy Nebbou and starring Juliette Binoche as Claire. In the film version, presumably with a wide national and international audience in mind, several changes attenuate the novel's sense of the irredeemably abject nature of female ageing, and its apparent tolerance of abusive male behaviour. The younger lover's contempt for Claire's age is considerably toned down, and Claire's male doctor/therapist in the clinic becomes an empathetic woman, the relationship between the two women metonymically figuring the possibility of female solidarity.
[12] See <https://www.thelocal.fr/20200527/french-government-unveils-18-new-official-translations-for-tech-vocab/> [accessed 15 September 2021].
[13] With five other female authors, in 2016 Vareille set up #TeamRomcom, a 'collectif d'auteures de comédies romantiques à la française' with its own tongue-in-cheek manifesto in which a high-heeled, champagne-perfumed figure representing the *comédie romantique* appears to each one of them ('On ne choisit pas la comédie romantique, c'est elle qui nous choisit') and designates them as her authors: 'Nous, on reste là, comme des connes, alors qu'on rêvait d'écrire une auto-fiction torturée. Et on se dit: "Pourquoi moi ??!".' Isabelle Alexis, Tonie Béhar, Adèle Bréau, Sophie Henrionnet, Marianne Levy, Marie Vareille, *Manifeste pour la comédie romantique* , http://teamromcom.com/manifeste/ [accessed 9 August 2022].
[14] Vareille, *Je peux très bien*, p. 24.
[15] Anita Harris coins this term (the 'Can-Do girl') in her book *Future Girl* (London: Routledge, 2003). See the Introduction to this special issue.
[16] Vareille, *Je peux très bien*, p. 17.
[17] Miano, *Habiter la frontière*, p. 138.
[18] Léonora Miano, *Blues pour Élise* (Paris: Plon, 2010), p. 78. Further references will be given in the main text.
[19] Miano, *Habiter la frontière*, p. 30.
[20] 'C'étaient des émotifs. Pas des méchants.', Bogus reflects. 'Ils voyaient rouge quand ils avaient de la peine, distribuaient des taloches, des coups de pompe, parce qu'on leur avait dit que les garçons se conduisaient ainsi' (*Blues pour Élise* p. 125).