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DIPLOMA THESIS

Role of Racism in *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* by
Caleb Azumah Nelson

Role rasismu v románech *Queenie* od Candice-Carty Williams a *Open Water*
od Caleb Azumah Nelson

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I hereby declare that the present diploma thesis “Role of Racism in *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson” is my original work and that no sources other than those listed in the Works Cited section were employed. I further declare that this diploma thesis was not used to obtain another academic title.

Prague, 2024

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ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá aspekty rasismu ve dvou současných britských románech, konkrétně *Queenie* (2019) od Candice Carty-Williams a *Open Water* (2021) od Caleb Azumah Nelson. Cílem této práce je prozkoumat, jak oba autoři pojmají rasismus. Motivací pro tento cíl je ukázat, jak tyto dva romány slouží jako odraz problematiky rasismu v moderní britské společnosti. Dále se tato práce soustřeďuje na rozlišení mezi otevřenými a skrytými projevy rasismu, aby poukázala na to, že rasismus není vždy explicitní. První část této práce se převážně opírá o současné studie a publikace zabývající se tímto tématem, aby poskytla klíčovou terminologii a koncepty, čímž vytváří teoretický rámec pro literární analýzu provedenou v druhé části práce. Druhá část představuje interpretaci otevřených a skrytých forem rasismu, které se objevily ve dvou románech *Queenie* a *Open Water*, a jejich vliv na protagonisty. Tato část zkoumá, jak rasistické postoje a chování ovlivňují životy a identity hlavních protagonistů, a jak se odrážejí na jejich duševním zdraví, sebepojetí a mezilidských vztazích. Na tyto následky je v práci poukázáno s účelem zvýšit povědomí o problematice rasismu a také podporovat empatii a pochopení.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Candice Carty-Williams, *Queenie*, Caleb Azumah Nelson, *Open Water*, rasismus, současná britská próza

ABSTRACT

This diploma thesis explores the aspects of racism in two contemporary British novels, namely, *Queenie* (2019) by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Azumah Nelson. The aim of this thesis is to explore how both authors portray racism. The motivation behind this objective is to demonstrate that the two novels serve as a reflection of the issue of racism in modern-day British society. Furthermore, the present thesis focuses on the distinction between overt and covert manifestations of racism in order to highlight that racism is not always explicit. The first section of this thesis relies predominantly on contemporary studies and publications on the subject to provide the crucial terminology and concepts, setting a theoretical framework for the literary analysis conducted in the latter part. The second section offers an interpretation of overt and covert forms of racism and their effect on the protagonists which have arisen in the two literary works, *Queenie* and *Open Water*. This part explores how racist behaviour, and attitudes impact the lives and identities of the main protagonists, impinging on their mental health, self-perception and interpersonal relationships. The purpose of emphasising the consequences is to raise awareness of racial issues as well as promote empathy and understanding.

KEYWORDS

Candice-Carty Williams, *Queenie*, Caleb Azuma Nelson, *Open Water*, racism, contemporary British fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the changing attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities, till this day, racism remains an omnipresent issue interwoven into different levels of society. This thesis explores the current issue of racism in the United Kingdom and the ways in which racism is portrayed in contemporary British fiction. The two literary works which were chosen for this purpose are *Sunday Times* bestseller *Queenie* (2019) by Candice Carty-Williams and *Times* bestseller *Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Azumah Nelson. Both works are popular and well-received both by critics and the reading public. What is more, as the heritage of both authors lies in the former British colonies, their works represent an important multicultural tendency in contemporary British fiction (Bentley 58).

Carty-Williams' *Queenie* has been described as a modern *Bridget Jones's Diary* due to its similar tone and themes. While Carty-Williams perceives this comparison to be "interesting", she states that as opposed to *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Queenie* is "political" (Buzzfeed UK, 00:00:27-00:01:06). In terms of *Open Water*, the novel represents Nelson's literary debut through which he received praise as "an exhilarating new voice in British fiction" (*Caleb Azumah Nelson*).

These two novels were selected as they both realistically demonstrate how the lives and identities of two young Black British individuals are impacted by racism, reflecting the present situation in British society. Furthermore, both Carty-Williams and Nelson are writers of colour, Carty-Williams being British-Jamaican-Indian and Nelson British-Ghanian, who have stated that their works were influenced by their personal experience with racism which adds depth to their novels. Additionally, incorporating two different works in this thesis provides the opportunity to carry out a comparative analysis, illustrating how the two authors employ different means of addressing racial issues, yet both are able to capture the intricacies of racism, leaving a lasting impact on readers. It should also be noted that the authors' approaches differ greatly since Carty-Williams employs satire and irony to address racism whereas Nelson's work is almost poetic, filled with vivid imagery with a distinctive rhythm achieved through the repetition of certain words. What is more, presenting two distinct novels allows readers to explore the topic of racism from different perspectives.

With that being said, the present thesis aims to analyse what role racism plays in contemporary British fiction, particularly, in *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. The focus is on overt and covert forms of racism and their distinct manifestations. The intention behind this division is to emphasise that racism is not always easy to detect, demonstrating that subtle instances of racism can be as detrimental as blatant racist practices. Through the interpretation of racist behaviour and attitudes presented in the novels, this thesis attempts to discover in which ways and to which degree the novels represent the issue of racism in contemporary British society.

Mainly based on contemporary studies and publications, such as *Covert Racism: Theories, Institutions, and Experiences* by Rodney Coates or *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* by Reni Eddo-Lodge, the theoretical part introduces the essential concepts, establishing a solid foundation for the analysis conducted in the practical part of the thesis. The theoretical part elucidates the notion of racism and race, highlighting that racism does not only concern the interpersonal layer. Moreover, this section provides a distinction between overt and covert racism, including their various manifestations. Lastly, this part explores racism in the United Kingdom since 2010s, shedding light on the impact of slavery, colonialism and mass immigration. The practical part begins with the introduction of Candice Carty-Williams and Caleb Azumah Nelson and their respective works, including the factors that inspired their creative processes. Grasping the authors' background and motivation behind the creation of the novels allows readers to recognise the messages the authors aimed to deliver. Finally, relying on the theoretical background, this section presents the interpretation of overt and covert expressions of racism which have occurred in *Queenie* and *Open Water*, highlighting their impact on the lives of the main protagonists. The analysis of the instances of racism in the two novels may help readers understand the complexities of this issue; furthermore, it may enable them to develop a greater empathy for the victims of racism.

THEORETICAL PART

The following section provides readers with the essential concepts and terminology necessary to thoroughly understand the literary analysis carried out in the latter, practical part. The theoretical background introduces the concept of racism, race, the grounds for racism and how racism permeates different levels of society. The following chapter explains the difference between overt and covert racism, presenting their varying manifestations. The last chapter of this part describes the issue of racism in present day United Kingdom. The presented theoretical framework is predominantly established on contemporary articles, research, scientific studies and specialised literature.

1 Racism

Considering that the notion of racism is a key element of the present diploma thesis, it is necessary to explain the meaning of this term. Throughout the years, various definitions of racism have been provided and its interpretation may somewhat differ; nevertheless, the essence remains the same. In order to demonstrate the varying understandings of racism, several concepts, which have appeared in distinct publications, studies and research, will be introduced.

The term racism as such has been introduced during the 1920s and 1930s; however, “racism, both as a set of ideas and as social practice, has a much longer history” (Berg and Wendt 1). Miles and Brown describe racism as “a denial of humanity”, it is basically disregarding the fact that all races are a part of the human race, which serves as a form of rationalisation for inequality (11). Grosfoguel defines racism as a “global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of human”. Grosfoguel adds that this hierarchy is manifested within the cultural, economic and political domains (10). Berg and Wendt’s definition correlates with the Grosfoguel’s one as they state that racist beliefs operate on the perception that society is a “natural hierarchy of supposedly superior and inferior races”, which was later used as a justification for “colonial conquest, slavery, and genocide as well as the segregation of and discrimination against purportedly inferior races” (1). Similarly, Coates makes the following claim:

Basically, racism is an ideology of racial domination that features two things: (1) beliefs that one race is either biologically or culturally inferior to another and (2) the use of such beliefs to rationalize or prescribe the way that the “inferior” race should be treated in this society as well as to explain their social position as a group and their collective accomplishments. (Coates 19)

One may wonder what the reason behind the emergence of racism was and how it managed to evolve into a vehicle of power of such extent. Berg and Wendt put forward the theory that racism is a Western ideology employed to justify “the subjugation and exploitation of non-white peoples” (2). Standing on racist beliefs, this ideology strongly fuelled the European expansion. In addition, it was used in order to solidify the superior position of “the so-called white race” (Berg and Wendt 2). Therefore, despite racial discrimination being present even in the Middle East or Asian countries, such as China or Japan (Berg and Wendt 2), it was mainly the rise and the impact of racism in Europe and North America which were the focal point of the existing studies (Berg and Wendt 1). This focus may be influenced by the global impact of the Western colonisation and slavery. Nevertheless, it highlights the importance to expand the scope of racial studies in order to grasp the complexities of racism.

It is necessary to highlight that the definitions presented are grounded in contemporary theories and studies, as opposed to the discredited eugenics theory or scientific racism. The roots of eugenics may be found in the late 1800s, with an increase in popularity during the early 20th century. The second half of the 20th century also witnessed the rise of scientific racism which proposed that biological and behavioural traits were “fixed and unchangeable”, placing individuals and groups into a hierarchy based on these traits. As for eugenics, it is a “scientifically inaccurate theory” associated with discrimination, racism, ableism and colonialism with its far-reaching influence still discernible in policies and beliefs in modern-day society (“Eugenics and Scientific Racism”). It is a theory which promoted the enhancement of biological quality of the human population through “selective breeding”. This proposition was built on the conviction that human qualities and social behaviours such as intelligence, sexual orientation, aggressiveness or criminality as well as diseases and disorders were linked to the concept of race. Moreover, the theory suggested that these

notions were hereditary “in a simple fashion”, implying that it is an uncomplicated, straightforward process (Allen 314; “Eugenics and Scientific Racism”). In order to “improve” the population, the proposed methods included involuntary sterilisation, segregation and social exclusion in order to eliminate “unfit” members of society (“Eugenics and Scientific Racism”). One of the most prominent examples of the implementation of eugenics was the “cleansing” of the German population in Nazi Germany or the compulsory sterilisation in the 1970s US, targeting Latinxs, Native Americans, African Americans and also disabled or impoverished individuals (Allen 323; “Eugenics and Scientific Racism”). Therefore, despite being a flawed and oversimplified theory, eugenics severely impinged on marginalised groups (“Eugenics and Scientific Racism”). Furthermore, from the demonstrated examples, it would be plausible to assume that eugenics was more a “political attitude” than a scientific one, weaponised with the aim to attain political, scientific or economic power (Courgeau 78).

1.1 Grounds for Racism

As mentioned before, racism presents the idea of hierarchical structuring of the society. One may assume that this hierarchy is based solely on the concept of race; however, that is not exactly the case. Racism may target individuals associated with various perceived “identities”, which apart from race, also includes ethnicity, language, culture, nationality, religion or a combination of these elements (Grosfoguel 10; Cole 2). This means that, for instance, hatred towards people practising a certain religion, such as Jews or Muslims, might also be regarded as a form of racism (Berg and Wendt 4). Thus, it is important to recognise the multifaceted nature of racism by acknowledging that racism encompasses more than just “colour-coded prejudice” (Goodfellow, “Race and Processes of Racialisation” 38). With that being said, even though colour and race still remain the prevailing “marker of racism”, it is crucial to understand that racism within a certain region or part of the world does not have to fit the common definition (Grosfoguel 10) considering that racism is “dynamic in terms of time and place: it is not a static concept” (Goodfellow, “Race and Processes of Racialisation” 31).

1.2 Race

Is there any scientific evidence which would substantiate the existence of the supposed natural hierarchy of human races? In order to answer this question, it is essential to shed light on the notion of race. According to Cole, race is a social construct (1). As a matter of fact, this attitude seems to also be shared by other researchers. By way of illustration, Dărăbant et al. suggest that it was through the contact of European colonisers and the indigenous populations with distinct “physical traits, languages, traditions and culture” which prompted the creation of the concept of human races as they are understood today (1). Hacker proposes that race is a product of “speculation and power” without any “real scientific meaning” (3). What is more, some theoreticians claim that by abandoning the view of race as a legitimate scientific term, one would no longer ascribe certain talents, worth or power to the proposed racial groups (Hacker 6). Fu et al. assert that “the concept of race has no biological validity” (2485). This claim may be supported by the fact highlighted by Wade et al. in their article *Race* “there are no genes that can identify distinct groups that accord with the conventional race categories”. Lastly, Frank Dikötter asserts that society created races based on assumed biological characteristics although the boundaries between the distinct races often overlap (21).

This results in the absence of a clear definition, classification or even a verification of the existence of human races (Dărăbant et al.1). Since there is not a universal classification of human races, several existing taxonomies will be presented. Fu et al. divide the human races into “African/African American, Caucasian, East Asian, Native American/American Indian, Pacific Islander, Asian Indian, and Hispanic/Latino” (2485). According to Billinger, anthropologists’ classification include Caucasoid, Negroid and Mongoloid (456). As for Coon et al., they propose 6 categories, specifically, Negroid, Mongoloid, White, Australoid, American Indians and Polynesian (114). While some employ the colour terminology – “black”, “brown”, “red”, “yellow”, “white” (Blumenbach qt. in Dikötter 22), the issue with the usage of colour terminology is that some may wrongly assume that race means only skin colour, which is not the case since race, generally, “refers to a person’s physical appearance or characteristics” (Fu et al. 2483, 2485). Evidently, there is a lack of clarity surrounding racial categories as researchers are unable to reconcile their findings regarding the number

of races, much less their defining qualities. Based on the observations proposed by distinct authors, it may be assumed that since race is a product of society, the same might be applied for the issue of racism (Cole 1).

From what was stated previously, one may deduce that the idea of race is a social concept rather than a biological one. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that some form of classification of differences between groups of humans happens to be relevant in the area of medicine. To be more specific, especially in the matter of susceptibility to and the treatment of genetic diseases (Cole 1). To illustrate, Karter et al. carried out research on the complications faced by diabetics which demonstrated that there were notably fewer cases of Black, Asians and Hispanics experiencing myocardial infarction compared to Whites or that Blacks had higher incidence of strokes than Whites (qtd. in Bulatao and Anderson). However, even in terms of genetics, only 6-10 percent of genetic diversity is related to “the broadly defined races”. Moreover, the majority of these differences concern the noticeable features, such as skin colour or hair texture (Cole 1). Wade affirms this stance by asserting that it has been proven that humans, irrespective of their race, share more genetic similarities than differences. In addition, two individuals genetically differ in less than 1 percent (“Race”). Thus, acknowledging the racial differences in everyday life is questionable (Cole 1).

1.3 Levels of Racism

Cole describes contemporary racism as a complex and omnipresent issue which can be manifested in a variety of forms (2). To illustrate this point, racism can be intentional or unintentional, covert or overt, direct or indirect, dominative or aversive, psychological as well as physical (Cole 3). Moreover, it is essential to understand that racism is “endemic”, meaning that it includes not only blatant hateful acts, but also subtle operations, usually executed by institutions of power, resulting in the disadvantaged position of certain racial minority groups (Cole 4). In order to demonstrate the number of areas which racism has permeated; different levels of racism shall be presented.

1.3.1 Interpersonal Racism

It is interpersonal racism, also known as “personally mediated racism” (Rodriguez-Knutsen) which is what most people imagine under the issue of racism. This generally recognised form of racism consists of four elements – “racist beliefs, racist individual, targeted individual and racist act” (“Berkeley Institute Breaks Down Structural Racism in Visual Explainer Video” 00:00:39 – 00:01:02). Racist individuals essentially act on their racist beliefs which may be expressed in the form of prejudice and discrimination (Jones 1212). In Jones’ words, prejudice refers to “differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intention of others according to race” while discrimination is defined as “differential actions toward others according to their race” (1212-1213). What does this look like in the real world? Instances of interpersonal racism include devaluation, lack of respect, everyday avoidance, microaggression, racial slurs or physical violence (Jones et al. 1213; Rodriguez-Knutsen).

While interpersonal racism is what is commonly understood as racism, it is not the only form of this concept. In fact, there are more intricate versions of racism which are not as visible, yet Braveman et al. consider them even more detrimental (171).

1.3.2 Institutional Racism

Institutional racism is a demonstration of racism within institutions, such as, schools, workplaces or police departments (Abraham). In comparison with interpersonal racism, institutional racism does not “require a racist individual or racist beliefs” (“Berkeley Institute Breaks Down Structural Racism in Visual Explainer Video”, 00:01:10). Institutional racism concerns policies and practices of certain institutions – corporate, governmental or organisational, which appear to be “race-neutral”; however, they result in an unfair treatment of racial minorities (“Berkeley Institute Breaks Down Structural Racism in Visual Explainer Video”, 00:01:10 – 00:02:20). In other words, racism being institutionalised means that it is no longer about personal prejudices as it represents a racist belief system which has the power to shape and transform society. The issue with institutional racism is that it is usually covert, meaning that it is challenging to detect (Miles and Brown 66). What is more, the existence of institutional racism reinforces structural racism.

The theory of institutional racism originated in the United States; nevertheless, it has also been present in the United Kingdom due to the colonial history of the country as well as the treatment of immigrants from the former British colonies (Miles and Brown 69). An example of the practices of institutional racism were the Jim Crow laws under which certain facilities, such as schools, churches, hospitals, cemeteries or movie theatres were racially segregated (Bowser 580).

1.3.3 Systemic Racism

Systemic racism is a broader term compared with institutional racism. While institutional racism concerns individual institutions, systemic racism refers to the interrelatedness of racial discrimination across a “a system of various institutions”, for instance, within the healthcare system, educational system or criminal justice system. To put it differently, it is the expansion of racial disparities across the whole system (“Berkeley Institute Breaks Down Structural Racism in Visual Explainer Video”, 00:02:20 – 00:03:38).

Banaji et al. define systemic racism as “a unified arrangement of racial differentiation and discrimination across generation” (1). In order to grasp the gravity of this issue, it is necessary to understand that systemic racism concerns various facets of society – “a) institutional structures (practices, policies, climate), (b) social structures (state/federal programs, laws, culture), (c) individual mental structures (e.g., learning, memory, attitudes, beliefs, values), and (d) everyday interaction patterns (norms, scripts, habits)” (Banaji et al. 2). Clearly, systemic racism permeates into different levels of our society. The issue is that its manifestation is not bound to intention or awareness as its power stems from the fact that it is deeply ingrained in “a unified system of racial differentiation and discrimination that creates, governs, and adjudicates opportunities and outcomes across generations” (Banaji et al. 2).

1.3.4 Structural Racism

Structural racism is the broadest term. Structural racism concerns the engagement of all the systems. It is the combination of interpersonal, institutional and systemic racism (“Berkeley Institute Breaks Down Structural Racism in Visual Explainer Video”, 00:04:18 – 00:05:02). Racism being structural means that it is “sustained and perpetuated by social institutions” since it is “institutionally embedded” (Goodfellow, “Race and Processes of Racialisation”

32). Simply put, “structural racism encompasses all of the social, political and economic systems of our society collectively”, this combination of power results in the racially based disparities in terms of healthcare, education, employment, and so on (Abraham).

It should be noted that definitions of institutional, systemic and structural racism may vary across distinct publications. The definition provided above states that the term structural racism includes systemic racism. Contradictory to this view, Braveman et al. suggest the systemic racism is the broader term (172). As for Glover and Miguel, they claim that systemic and structural racism are often used interchangeably. Regarding institutional racism, Abraham believes that institutional and structural racism are “interconnected, yet the meanings are not identical”. On the other hand, Braveman et al. assert that institutional racism and systemic or structural racism may be used synonymously (172). Despite the differing definitions, the interconnectedness of these notions cannot be denied. For the purpose of this thesis, the definitions provided above will be employed.

2 Overt vs. Covert Racism

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, racism is a multifaceted issue expressed in a number of ways. Within the framework of this thesis' objectives, the emphasis will be placed on overt and covert racism. This chapter aims to introduce the differences between these forms of racism, and their manifestations in today's society, focusing on English-speaking countries.

2.1 Overt Racism

Overt racism concerns visible and easily detectable practices of racism which aim to "dehumanise", "devalue", "exploit" and "oppress" racially marginalised groups (Elias 1). The behaviour which is perceived as being overtly racist is characterised by its intentional and conscious nature (CultureAlly). Moreover, overt racism may be recognised through unconcealed and damaging "attitudes, ideas or symbols and actions" targeting non-White, also referred to as coloured, racial groups (Elias 1).

Historically speaking, overt racism dates back to the period of European colonisation and slavery, particularly, the treatment of colonised and enslaved people of colour (Elias 1). During that period, European colonisers strived to create a division between themselves and people of colour. This dissociation between the two groups was based on supposed religious, philosophical, cultural, sociological and biological factors which led to the establishment of the hierarchy of inferiority and superiority among people of colour and White people (Elias 1). It was the oppression and exploitation of non-White people which laid a foundation for overt racist practices which were deemed to be crucial for the success of slavery and colonisation (Elias 1). Thus, one may say that overt racism is an instrument of control produced by White supremacy (Elias 1). Apart from slavery and colonisation, examples of overt racism throughout history include the genocide of the indigenous Native American people, lynching of African Americans or Nazi antisemitism, rooted in the "myth of the white Aryan's racial purity" (Elias 2; CultureAlly; Saucier et al., "Overt Racism" 83).

The difference between overt racism of the past, such as Jim Crow laws or apartheid in South Africa, and the present time is that in the past, the overt racist practices were a part of the system, meaning that they were "embraced and even trumpeted" (Elias 2). Nowadays, overt

racism is no longer viewed as socially nor morally acceptable, in fact, it tends to be reviled (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 77). However, certain techniques have been created in order to hide, diminish or even rationalise overt racism. Therefore, even in its overt form, racism is to an extent concealed (Elias 3). In addition, present day’s overt expressions of racism tend to be disregarded or even conflated with other social issues. This behaviour may be due to the perception that since contemporary racism is not as extreme as it was in the past, it remains unacknowledged as racism (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 101). Hence, although in contemporary society, overt racism is not endorsed, it still exists and has the power to negatively impact the well-being of individuals as well as society as a whole (Elias 2; Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 77).

Furthermore, those who perpetrate overt racism may not only be individuals, but also groups and institutions (CultureAlly). One may wonder what compels individuals to discriminate against others. In the case of racism, factors such as self-esteem, control, empowerment or superiority instigates racist behaviour. Simply, racism benefits the racial majority as it upholds their dominant position within the political, social and corporate fields (Dovidio and Gaertner 112). For that reason, it serves as “a means of social control” (Coates 239). In addition, racism tends to be overtly expressed due to a deep-rooted feeling of hostility towards a certain racial group. Individuals who feel supported by their surrounding and individuals who believe their opinions to be justified, for instance, when certain racial groups are falsely assumed to be the cause of social problems, are more prone to express their aversion blatantly (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 98).

After providing a brief overview of overt racism, the following subchapters will be dedicated to the chosen examples of contemporary expressions of overt racism, specifically, hate crimes, racial slurs, racial humour as well as racial sexualisation and fetish.

2.1.1 Hate Crimes

Hate crimes are considered to be one of the most conspicuous forms of overt racism as they are most of the times of a vicious nature (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 86). It is basically a criminal activity driven by prejudice against a particular religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability or in the context of this thesis, against a specific race (CultureAlly). The victims are, consequently, chosen for their recognised “membership” in a certain racial group

(Saucier et al., “The Impact of Racial Slurs” 685). The attack itself is not necessarily the purpose of a hate crime, it is rather the message of animosity which is conveyed through the violent act (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 87). Apart from bodily harm, hate crimes also impinge on the victims psychologically due to the fear of potential victimisation in the future. Saucier et al. assert that victims of hate crimes are prone to suffer from stress, anxiety and trauma. These psychological repercussions stem from the fact that the victims were targeted solely for their race, an inherent aspect of their identity which cannot be erased, meaning that they may be at risk of future crimes, leaving them in a vulnerable position (“Overt Racism” 87).

2.1.2 Racial Slurs

According to Camp, slurs are one of “the most rhetorically powerful and insidious expressions of language” (330) whose purpose is to “derogate, demean, insult, belittle, disparage or diminish” on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and so on (Anderson and Lepore 25, 27). Conventionally, slurs express a “negative attitude” against specific groups (Anderson and Lepore 26). When a person uses a slur, he or she conveys a strong opinion towards not only the individual, but also towards the group as a whole. In addition, the choice of words indicates the predominant characteristic which the speaker associates with the targeted groups, usually a negative stereotype or belief (Camp 337; O’Dea 156).

Racial slurs may be understood as derogatory words intended to deprecate people of colour (CultureAlly). Examples of racial slurs include the “N-word” or “chink” (Anderson and Lepore 25). It has been disputed that racial slurs are simply words; however, words are not empty as they convey content (Anderson and Lepore 26). Furthermore, opting for a derogatory term instead of a more neutral term, such as Black instead of the “N-word”, implies that the speakers “approve of the legitimacy of uttering the slurring term and what that typically conveys” (Croom 4).

One may also argue that even people of the particular racial group employ racial slurs. Anderson and Lepore explain these circumstances as a form of “reclamation” during which people of colour consciously use slurs in a “positive and defiant way” (41). Moreover, it is

a means of enhancing “in-group solidarity” as well as promoting rapport within the group (Croom 1).

2.1.3 Racial Humour

Racial humour is commonly used as a tool to “disparage” people of certain racial groups (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 93). Racist jokes are not regarded with due seriousness since humour is generally perceived to be socially acceptable. Even if a joke is highly derogatory, the author may simply add “I was just kidding” and if the targets object, they are considered to be uptight as they cannot “take a joke” (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 94-95). The issue is that even supposedly harmless jokes may prompt more serious forms of discrimination (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 94). In conclusion, even if the author’s intention is not malicious, the joke may negatively impact one’s sense of worth and self-esteem (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 95).

2.1.4 Sexualisation and Fetish

Women of colour tend to be subjects of sexualisation and objectification, also referred to as sexual racism (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 91; Zheng 400). The sexualisation of non-White women may occur in different forms, some instances shall be presented.

Regarding Black women, they are often described as promiscuous and overly sexual (West 1). This inaccurate portrayal of Black women creates a false narrative that their attacks and harassment were to a certain extent wanted or even desired. As a consequence, violence against Black women was often overlooked or not treated with due seriousness (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 91). The source for such a perception of Black women may stem from the period of slavery, during which enslaved Black women were commonly raped. Moreover, their value was bound to their reproductive capacity as children of slaves could be sold, adding to the owner’s fortune, which reinforced the depiction of Black women as objects with a purpose (West 2).

Another example of racially motivated sexualisation concerns Asian women. In their case, it is often referred to as Asian fetish or “yellow fever” (Zheng 400). According to Zheng, racial fetish regards “a person’s exclusive or near-exclusive preference for sexual intimacy with others belonging to a specific racial out-group” (401). It may be argued that “yellow

fever” is solely an aesthetic preference, the same as the preference of blondes or brunettes (Zheng 401-402). Therefore, some may believe that fetishising Asian women is a compliment, disregarding its harmful implications (Zheng 401). The difference is that blondes or brunettes were not subjected to years of exploitation, colonisation, persecution and their hair colour does not affect their access to certain opportunities (Zheng 409). Furthermore, Asian women are viewed to be desirable as they are often portrayed as submissive and soft-spoken, which is a result of Asians being regarded as the model minority (Zheng 405).

One of the implications of sexual racism is that women of colour are reduced to objects, no longer seen as human beings (Zheng 411-412). What is more, this type of sexualisation and dehumanisation of non-White women occurs purely on account of their belonging to a certain racial group, reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Zheng 401, 410). Such objectification may also further lead to sexual violence (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 93).

2.2 Covert Racism

Blatant discrimination or physical violence is how racism is commonly recognised. This traditional perception of racism is further reinforced by the media coverage. However, it should be noted that racism does not have to be exclusively open and visible for it to be considered as racism (Gopalkrishnan 95). While racism still exists in its overt form, it is necessary to acknowledge its changing nature. Nowadays, the expressions of overt racism have diminished and racism as such has transformed into a more subtle yet pernicious form, known as covert racism (Saucier et al., “Overt Racism” 104). This shift towards a more discreet version of racism may be attributed to the contemporary social norms which strongly promotes equality; therefore, openly expressing prejudicial beliefs against racial minorities would certainly contradict these values (Tougas et al. 178). For that reason, while overt racism is generally perceived as socially unacceptable, covert racism is more acceptable and even practiced within society (“Overt and Covert Racism”).

As opposed to overt racism, covert racism is not as easily recognisable since it is not perpetuated directly (CultureAlly). Coates asserts that covert racism is “hidden; secret; private; covered; disguised; insidious; or concealed” (1) and it aims to “subvert, distort, restrict, and deny rewards, privileges, access, and benefits to racial minorities” (2). What

makes covert racism dangerous is that “plausible deniability” is its fundamental constituent. To clarify, the concept of “plausible deniability” enables the potential perpetrators to “deny responsibility and culpability” which hampers the victims’ effort to “claim damage(s)” (Coates 2). What is more, the concealed nature of covert racism poses difficulties for its identification and subsequent punishment in terms of legal or formal processes (Gopalkrishnan 96). Another challenge, in terms of covert racism, is the fact that it is so deeply ingrained in society that people seem to be unaffected by or even indifferent to this problem. In fact, covert racism is normalised to such an extent that individuals may not realise that they are being racist (Coates 2). Coates adds that covert racism persists within social environments due to the fact that it is “inherently inculcated” and further transmitted across generations (121). Thus, it comes as no surprise that covert racism is associated with a great deal of “denial, omission, and obfuscation” (Coates 2).

What is more, covert racism is perpetuated not only by individuals and groups, but also by institutions, systems and structures. In fact, schools, police, courts, media or even close social circles such as friends and family play a pivotal role in the process of maintaining and altering the system of racial discrimination and exploitation (Coates 246). The continuation of hidden inequalities is possible considering that covert racist behaviour is not solely restricted to individual intention, but it also extends to societal norms and underlying processes (Coates 122). To phrase it differently, “traditions, norms, and customs” are employed in order to conceal and validate covert racism (Coates 243).

Having introduced an outline of covert racism, the upcoming sections will focus on the selected examples showcasing manifestations of covert racism in today’s society, namely, shunning, colourism, racial insensitivity, racial microaggressions, racial stereotypes, racial profiling and police brutality.

2.2.1 Shunning

Shunning represents one of the oldest forms of racism and it may be understood as an act of ignoring or avoiding interactions with a specific individual or group of individuals with the intent to punish the targeted individual or group (Coates 124). Shunning occurs in several forms ranging from benign neglect, meaning that the racial minority is perceived to be

invisible, to exclusion which results in the marginalisation of the targeted individuals or group (Coates 124).

The perpetrators of shunning may be individuals, institutions or even society as a whole. However, as a result of its informal character, there is a lack of laws or norms which would regulate this type of racism, which leads to shunning being, generally, regarded as “voluntary association” rather than as an expression of covert racism (Coates 124-125). Another feature of shunning is, what Coates described as “conspiracy of silence” which essentially means “acceptance” and “compliance” of the racial majority (Coates 125). Conspiracy of silence is frequently associated with collective denial, minimisation and trivialisation which leads to victims being convinced to believe that the reason behind them not securing a position or a loan was completely unrelated to race (Coates 125). Additionally, this silence also functions within the family and friend setting, where the members risk being ostracised or ridiculed if they choose to oppose racist behaviour, including remarks or jokes (Coates 125).

2.2.2 Colourism

Dyson et al. state that colourism is a “by-product of racism”, commonly understood as “discrimination based on skin tone, hair texture, and facial features” which can have an impact on an individual’s social and economic standing (242). The origins of colourism may be traced back to the period of enslavement during which slaves were classified on the basis of skin colour, creating skin-colour hierarchies where lighter colours were considered to be more favourable (Dyson et al. 242-243). Dyson et al. add that this arrangement was supposed to reflect the “European values and aesthetics” (242).

The effects of colourism can be detected even in contemporary society where this form of racism affects primarily women of colour, in terms of “education, employment, dating and marriage” (Dyson et al. 242). Highly influenced by the European beauty standards, many Black young girls and women feel compelled to bleach their skin, straighten their hair or undergo drastic cosmetic procedures in order to feel accepted by society. Moreover, this skin-colour hierarchy is amplified by media representation in which light-skinned Black women are portrayed as a “symbol of success” while dark-skinned Black women tend to be “oversexualised” (Dyson et al. 244). Additionally, as mentioned before, colourism may also permeate the educational and workplace environments. In fact, these institutions “reinforce

a colour caste system” as the higher positions are associated with light-skinned Black people whereas dark-skinned individuals are generally linked to the lower levels (Dyson et al. 245). Therefore, colourism does not only affect how individuals are perceived by society, but also how these individuals see themselves which may often create the necessity to “fit into the white majority” since “whiteness” was deemed to be the desired aesthetics (Dyson et al 243).

2.2.3 Racial Insensitivity

Medina defines racial insensitivity as the inability to understand different perspectives and the reluctance to accept someone’s hardships (178). It is an “insidious form of racial oppression” which functions through “ignorance” that further leads to the stigmatisation of racial minorities (Medina 178).

The challenge with racial insensitivity is that when pointed out, it is frequently met with the accusation of being racially oversensitive. This situation particularly arises when a member of a racial minority is the one to mention an occurrence of a racist attitude or behaviour. Thus, what was intended to be an “objective claim” is inaccurately transformed into “an emotional reaction” (Medina 180).

Ignorance may also be “inherited”, meaning that an individual becomes ignorant under the influence of his or her social environment, without necessarily choosing to do so. These individuals may respond with an argument that they “could not have known better and therefore he or she is not to blame”; nevertheless, these individuals should still be, to an extent, held accountable for their failure to address the given ignorance (Medina 188-190). Medina asserts that by ignoring racial insensitivity, one may become a complicit or even an active participant of this form of oppression. In other words, inherited ignorance might possibly develop into an active ignorance if one “fails to act against it” (Medina 191).

Developing racial sensitivity, meaning having the ability to understand racial minorities, requires more than simply acquiring factual knowledge about them. In reality, it is essential to be capable of listening to the experience of racial minorities and also to be able to take into consideration their point of views (Medine 192). In addition, it is necessary to explicitly confront individuals who are being racially insensitive and ignorant even if it is

uncomfortable since, at times, discomfort is needed for the sake of challenging this “numbness” (Medina 199-200).

2.2.4 Racial Microaggressions

Solorzano characterises microaggressions as “subtle insults” which may be both verbal and non-verbal as well as visual, directed at racial minorities (60). These actions are not always intentional as perpetrators may not be aware of the fact that what they are engaging in is considered as microaggression. Therefore, it may be said that microaggressions are expressed unintentionally, unconsciously and even automatically (Solorzano 60; Sue et al. 271). Microaggressions frequently take the shape of “snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” which aim to indirectly convey hostile racial attitudes (Sue et al. 271, 273). What is more, not only does this demeanour occur on a daily basis, but interracial interactions are, in general, susceptible to some instances of microaggression (Sue et al. 271). Therefore, the pervasiveness of microaggressions is undeniable since their manifestations have become common to such extent that they are often overlooked and dismissed as harmless (Sue et al. 273)

Sue et al. propose that microaggressions may be divided into three categories – microassault, microinsults and microinvalidation (271). A microassault is defined as a verbal or non-verbal “explicit racial derogation”, usually in the form of name-calling, avoidance or deliberate discrimination. Out of the three categories, microassaults are most likely to be intentional; nonetheless, they are not usually expressed publicly as perpetrators seek a certain degree of anonymity. Microinsults are recognised by communicating in a manner that is disrespectful and insensitive which aims to belittle an individual’s racial heritage or identity. Their demonstration is usually in a form of “subtle snubs” which carries a covert insult. Lastly, microaggressions take the form of microinvalidations. A microinvalidation is communicating with the intent to “exclude, negate, or nullify” the experiences, thoughts, feelings, and the overall reality of racial minorities (Sue et al. 274).

In order to present some instances of microaggression, several statements and questions will be presented, including the additional conveyed meanings. Questions such as “Where are you from?” or “Where are you really from?” convey the message that the person does not belong and despite being born or living in the country and speaking the language, he or she

is still perceived as a foreigner. “You are so articulate” implies that it is unusual for a certain race to be intelligent. “When I look at you, I don’t see colour”, this statement disregards and invalidates the individual’s racial experiences and struggles. “I’m not racist. I have several Black friends”, this message dismisses the complexity of racism, and the speaker refuses to take accountability (Sue et al. 276).

2.2.5 Racial Stereotypes

Stereotypes are defined as overgeneralised beliefs about the conduct, traits and abilities of members belonging to certain social groups, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or as in this case, race (Marx 1). Racial stereotypes may be both positive and negative and they are likely to persist even in the light of conflicting information (Marx 1). The issue is that stereotyping leads to a “homogenised” view of a particular racial group, meaning that the members’ individuality is often overlooked since they are perceived to be interchangeable, for instance, “all Latinos are lazy” or “all Asians are good at math” (Marx 6).

As the perception of racial groups have changed throughout the years, so have racial stereotypes. By way of illustration, Black people were once regarded as animals with a lack of intellect, now, new stereotypes have emerged, such as Blacks excelling in sports or music (Czopp et al. 452; Czopp and Monteith 235). The origins of this musicality stereotype can be traced back to portrayals of Black slaves singing in cotton fields, evolving through Black church choirs, to modern-day representations of Black rap artists. As for their athletic skills, this may be put down to their perceived “superior physical capabilities”, such as muscle strength (Czopp and Monteith 235). Czopp et al. suggest that it was the changing attitude towards the inappropriateness of negative racial stereotypes which prompted the rise of positive stereotypes (Czopp et al. 453). However, negative stereotypes have not been erased. With this shift, one wonders if positive stereotypes should be embraced. Positive stereotypes are intended to be compliments as they are characterised as “subjective favourable beliefs” based on the social group the addressee belongs to (Czopp et al. 451). While positive stereotypes encompass a certain degree of favouritism, it also includes a particular level of depersonalisation. For instance, the characterisation of Asians as the model minority. On one hand, this stereotype describes Asians as highly competent which may foster a sense of pride

(Lin et al. 34-35; Oyserman and Sakamoto 445). However, some have argued that even if the stereotype is positive, it is still a label applied to the whole group even if one does not identify with it, creating a feeling of marginalisation (Oyserman and Sakamoto 445). Thus, even positive stereotypes are perceived as constraints which might result in the misconception of someone's identity (Rogers et al. 73).

2.2.6 Racial Profiling

The systematic targeting of racial and ethnic minorities who are being subsequently subjected to disproportionate and unjust treatment or punishment captures what racial profiling portrays (Coates 252). Racial profiling occurs when one makes unfounded assumptions about a person based on their race, religion, ethnicity or country of origin (Sandeen 10). Racial profiling is often fuelled by racial bias which tends to be implicit (Fredrickson and Siljander 6). Implicit racial bias is a mechanism during which the human mind inadvertently reacts to different racial groups in divergent ways (Levinson and Smith 10). "Because of the automatic nature of these biases, people are often unaware of them or how they affect their judgements". Nevertheless, it is fundamental to overcome racial biases for the reason that they could be extremely dangerous or even lethal (Levinson and Smith 10).

The extreme cases of racial profiling are usually affiliated to the law enforcement as they are the ones who tend to draw the media's attention. The police enforcement has the authorisation to "stop, question, and investigate"; nevertheless, if they do so purely based on the person's race, the search is no longer motivated by reasonable suspicion but rather on "race-based assumptions" which is regarded as "an unfair discriminatory practice" (Sandeen 9; Grinapol 18). The severity of racial profiling should not be underestimated in light of the fact that the way in which racial minorities respond to racial profiling may be a matter of life and death, especially in the case of legal authorities. Since the outcome of racial profiling may be fatal, it is not unexpected that targets of racial profiling are at risk of stress and other health conditions (Coates 256). Be that as it may, police officers are not the only one who might participate in this discriminatory practice. The perpetrators of racial profiling, whether consciously or unconsciously, also include teachers, shop assistants or even members of

society at large who simply act according to general presumptions about racial minorities (Sandeen 13).

A striking demonstration of racial profiling concerns Muslims, especially after 9/11. Wearing attire associated with Islam, such as a hijab or turban, is usually the only reason why these individuals are subjected to frequent, random and often more intense searches, especially at airports (Coates 132). Moreover, the tragic events of 9/11 have been globally used to form the basis for anti-immigration policies, xenophobia and racial profiling in countries such as Denmark, England, Belgium or France (Coates 256). Another example of racial profiling concerns what Coates described as “shopping while Black”. In these situations, the store personnel often target their customers based on race rather than on their behaviour. The Black racial minority are, thus, singled out and their probability of being caught is higher in comparison with other racial groups which leaves an impression that Blacks are more likely to commit this crime (Coates 132). Racial profiling may also appear among colleagues, an instance of such concerns the prison system where prison guards of colour are more prone to be racially discriminated and abused by other guards than by prisoners (Coates 132).

With that being said, it is crucial to comprehend the difference between racial and criminal profiling, since these two terms tend to be incorrectly viewed as synonymous. Criminal profiling refers to a process of creating a list of characteristics which are believed to be associated with a certain criminal activity. This list may or may not include various factors, for instance, race, nationality, religion, or behavioral traits; thus, if the description of a potential suspect includes race or ethnicity in combination with other identifying factors, it is not classified as racial profiling (Fredrickson and Siljander 16).

2.2.7 Police Brutality

Gunawan defines police brutality as “creating cognitive and emotional suffering to members of the public by inflicting injuries and employing intimidation methods beyond the bounds of legally sanctioned police protocol” (21). Police brutality is expressed as the “overuse of force” against civilians which the police officers employ in the course of fulfilling their duties to uphold the law (22). In simpler words, police brutality refers to “an extreme, excessive or unjust use of force or violence” by law enforcement officers. This encompasses

verbal or physical harassment, causing mental or physical harm as well as property damage (CultureAlly). Additionally, police brutality is considered as a global phenomenon with historical roots dating back to the late 17th century in France, the USA and the UK (Gunawan 21). Nowadays, the excessive use of violence serves as a tool to “obtain and maintain power and control”. In terms of racial minorities, police brutality is linked with stereotypes, dehumanisation and objectification (Bryant-Davis et al. 866).

Furthermore, research has shown that Black people are more likely to be victims of police brutality in comparison with White people (Gunawan 22). Grills et al. asserts that the “disproportionate killing of Black people by the police” poses as one of the leading problems which the Black community has to encounter (334). Such treatment of people of African ancestry is greatly influenced by the view of them as inferior and as objects rather than human beings, thus, not worthy of respect (Grills et al. 334 - 335). This unjust treatment is further fuelled by the negative stereotypes and bias that Black people are dangerous and “beast-like” (Grills et al. 335). Due to these incidents, Black parents are more inclined to prepare their children for racial bias and unfair treatment, including teaching them what to do and how to react while interacting with the police (Bryant-Davis et al. 861; Hughes et al. 758).

Overall, it has been found that racial minorities are at a higher risk of being targeted by the police for the reason that they are usually, stereotypically, portrayed to be more likely to engage in criminal activities (Smith and Holmes 1035, 1039). As a consequence, racial minorities may suffer from “race-based” or “racist-incident trauma” which Bryant-Davis et al. described as “the psychological impact of oppression based on race” (856). This trauma may be triggered by experiencing physical harm inflicted on by the police, being a victim of microaggressions or simply by witnessing police violence, such as seeing “televised border patrol beatings” (Helms et al. 68). As a consequence, victims of police brutality may suffer from nightmares or flashbacks, and they tend to avoid or be highly vigilant around the law enforcement officers (Aymer qtd. in Bryant-Davis et al. 854).

All in all, despite the advancement within the legal system, efforts to decrease racial violence has not been as successful (Gunawan 19). Since police brutality is inhumane and heinous, it

is crucial to hold the police officers guilty of employing unwarranted force, accountable (Gunawan 22, 30).

3 Racial Issues in Contemporary British Society

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the issue of racism in contemporary United Kingdom. It provides a concise outline of the historical origins of racism in the United Kingdom and their impact on the current situation. Furthermore, the present chapter elucidates the racial issues prevalent in British society since 2010s, their complex manifestations, and the aftermath of Brexit.

3.1 Historical Outline

Racism has been a long-standing issue in British society, with its manifestations being transformed throughout the centuries. Historically, racial issues may be traced back to the colonial era of the British Empire and the period of slavery. The British slave trading began in 1562, lasting over 270 years until its prohibition in 1807 (Eddo-Lodge 3; Parsons 96). However, the institution of slavery as such was not fully abolished until 1834 with the implementation of the Abolition of Slavery Act (Parsons 96). Another significant moment for the multicultural UK was the period after the Second World War marked by labour shortages and the necessity to rebuild the economy which led to the mass immigration from the Caribbean and other Commonwealth countries (Small and Solomos 239). This event was met with a great deal of animosity and racism (Shankley and Byrne 35). Moreover, this mass immigration prompted a series of riots due to housing, employment and criminal issues allegedly induced by the presence of coloured immigrants as they were perceived to be threats to society (Shankley and Rodes 206; Small and Solomos 239). Followed by the growing hostility towards racial minorities and the increasing racial violence and unrest, the country responded by the introduction of Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968 and 1976. The Race Relation Acts aimed to prohibit discrimination based on race, colour and ethnicity using legal measures. Additionally, these legislations attempted to provide equality in terms of opportunity ensuring “equal access to employment, education, housing and public facilities” (Small and Solomos 241). Overall, the colonial past of the British Empire has inflicted lasting damage that is yet to be undone, and the association of immigration with racial issues has remained a significant element ever since (Small and Solomos 240).

3.2 The Issue of Racism in the United Kingdom since 2010s

Contemporary UK is experiencing a greater racial, ethnical and religious diversity than at any point in its history, with migration and multiculturalism becoming interwoven into the everyday life of the country (Shankley and Rhodes 9). In terms of racial and ethnic representation, as of 2021, 18% of the population identified as Black, Asian, mixed or from other minority ethnic groups (*Ethnicity Facts and Figures*). Nevertheless, the concept of “Britishness” is still linked to “whiteness”, promoting the “us and them” perception of society. Small and Solomos assert that this view of the British identity reinforces the belief that “real British people are white” implying that only individuals from this group possess a legitimate right to live in the country while the presence of the other groups is simply being tolerated (248). The 2018 *The Guardian* survey substantiated this perception, describing that 41% of the minorities reported that, due to their background, someone has questioned their British identity (Booth and Mohdin).

According to Shankley and Rhodes, racism remains apparent in a number of forms, occurring at different levels even in modern-day UK. However, seeing that contemporary UK has become more racially and ethnically diverse, and as the social and political contexts have evolved, the nature of racist discourse and practice has also altered. This shift highlights the deeply ingrained racism as well as the emergence of its new expressions (213). To illustrate this point, as mentioned before, the postwar United Kingdom was largely anti-Black, targeting the non-White immigrants from the New Commonwealth. To put it differently, the victims of racial discrimination, also perceived as “others”, were primarily targeted on the basis of skin colour. As a result, the term “immigrant” was often regarded as synonymous with “Black”, including “both migrants and subsequent generations of UK citizens with backgrounds in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean” (Shankley and Rhodes 213). Nowadays, the traditional views of racial hierarchy have merged with “newer forms of racism”, which employ the concept of “cultural incompatibility” to portray racial minorities as threats to the nation’s integrity (Shankley and Rhodes 213; Small and Solomos 240). Subsequently, these ideas were institutionalised in the form of immigration policies that “enshrined colour-coded forms of exclusion, which favoured white migrants” (Shankley and Rhodes 213).

Thus, individuals of the Caribbean, African and South Asian backgrounds remain the targets of racial aggression and discrimination. In comparison with the White British population, these groups are more likely to be subjected to inequality, interpersonal and institutional racism, racial harassment and victimisation. Nonetheless, it is crucial to point out that in recent decades, religion has played a key role in modern expressions of racism, particularly affecting Muslims as they are often portrayed as potential terrorists or supporters of terrorist attacks (Komaromi and Singh 10; Shankley and Rhodes 213). Therefore, anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia has become firmly rooted not only within British society but also in Europe as a whole, resulting in a great deal of “hostility, discrimination and exclusion” (Shankley and Rhodes 214).

3.2.1 Interpersonal Racism in the UK

In terms of interpersonal racism, one may delve into the attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities. The data provided by the 2013 NatCen’s British Social Attitudes Survey showed that 21% of the participants would mind if their close relative married an Asian person, 22% would mind if the person was Black and 44% would mind if the person was a Muslim. Moreover, the same survey carried out in 2017 demonstrated that 26% of the participants indicated that they would describe themselves as being “very” or “a little” prejudiced and 18% believed that some racial or ethnic groups are inherently less intelligent (Kelley et al. 7-11). According to the data provided by *The Guardian*, 53% of individuals from a minority background felt that they have experienced differential treatment based on their appearance, including hair or clothing, as opposed to 29% of White people, creating a pressure to change one’s appearance or even voice (Booth and Mohdin).

Concerning discrimination and violence, Shankley and Rhodes state that according to a survey from 2018, racial minorities are three times more likely to be denied entrance to or even get thrown out of restaurants, bars or clubs. Moreover, 38% of them have been wrongly suspected of shoplifting in comparison with 14% of White people (209). To continue, the 2019 poll detected that since 2016, the number of victims of discrimination with Black or Asian background increased from 58% to 71% (Shankley and Rhodes 209). Lastly, in 2023, Home Office figures reported that the number of racially motivated hate crimes has almost tripled since 2011 (“Hate Crime, England and Wales”).

3.2.2 Institutional Racism in the UK

Shankley and Rhodes report that in 2012, the British government “rejected mandatory commitments to equality impact assessment”. In addition, both the 2010 Emergency Budget, which was responsible for the implementation of “large-scale austerity policies” involving substantial cuts to welfare and public services, and the 2017 Budget were not evaluated in terms of their impacts on equality. This decision has been made despite evidence indicating that such policies have unevenly impinged on Black and minority ethnic communities. To be specific, these drastic cuts have especially negatively affected Black and minority women who are often found in low-wage and unstable jobs, disproportionately residing in impoverished areas, meaning that they are more dependent on benefits and public services (212).

What has also impacted contemporary multicultural UK was the 2018 Windrush scandal. This incident revealed the victimisation and deportation of individuals of the “Windrush generation” as well as people from other former British colonies. To explain, the 1971 Immigration granted the Commonwealth citizens the legal right to stay in the country; nevertheless, the government failed to accurately document the information about the individuals permitted to remain in the UK, which resulted in them being mistreated as illegal immigrants. For that reason, the affected individuals were not able to identify themselves as legal citizens; thus, they were barred from accessing healthcare, employment and housing. Moreover, many of them were either at risk of deportation or they were wrongly deported (Byrne et al. 1, Campbell).

Institutional racism is also evident within the criminal justice system. Despite the steady decrease in the number of stop-and-search among all racial and ethnic minorities, this practice continues to be excessively employed against racial and ethnic minorities for the reason that these policies “have grown out of anxieties over terrorism and other forms of violent crimes” (Shankley and Williams 51, 69). To provide an example, according to the data collected in 2016/2017, Black individuals still experience the highest rates of stop-and-search by the law enforcement, the rate being eight times higher compared to the White population. Black people are also twice as likely to face charges of drug possession even though their drug usage rates are lower (Eddo-Lodge 70). Furthermore, the incarceration of

minorities has risen from 26% to 45% between the years 2008 and 2018. This may be put down to the fact that the focus of the country's policies and politicians is on gangs which results in unfair criminal justice practices targeting non-White communities, without substantial evidence to support these actions (Shankley and Williams 51). In addition, as certain crimes, such as terrorism or knife crimes, are stereotypically linked to Black and Asian communities, these groups are, hence, facing an increased rate of surveillance, arrests and prosecution (Shankley and Rhodes 213; Shankley and Williams 53). Another issue concerning the discrimination regarding the law enforcement is that anti-discrimination laws have not had a significant impact on policing practices, enabling the police to operate without being held accountable. As a consequence, racial and ethnic minorities may be neglected or discriminated against (Shankley and Williams 53). To provide an example, the murder of Stephen Lawrence, an eighteen-year-old Black teenager, in 1993, serves as a pivotal point for the exposure of institutional racism embedded in the Metropolitan Police who failed to properly investigate this racially motivated hate crime, as the case was only resolved in 2012 with the imprisonment of two White men (Parsons 9-10; Shankley and Williams 70).

The issue of racism may also be recognised in terms of healthcare services. According to Nazroo, Black people are more prone to suffer from psychosis due to being the victims of racism and discrimination which often results in financial distress, social disadvantages, unemployment or harassment. What is more, even those who do not experience racism directly may be at risk of enduring mental health issues as these individuals "perceive their identities as under similar threat" (2). Therefore, in theory, mental health services are equally accessible to everybody; nonetheless, the quality of the treatment and the experience of the services differ greatly. Such discrimination together with racism may result in "incorrect diagnoses or inappropriate compulsory treatment" which is often the cause of delays in seeking help (Chouhan and Nazroo 87).

Lastly, one may encounter racism inside the workplace environment. Data provided by *The Guardian* survey indicated that 43% of members from a racial or ethnic minority in contrast to 18% of individuals of the White community were unfairly disregarded during a job application or promotion process. Furthermore, 57% of minorities perceived that they had to put more effort into their work in order to succeed and 40% reported to earn less or to

have poorer career opportunities due to their racial or ethnic background (Booth and Mohdin).

Overall, racial and ethnic minorities continue to be perceived through an adverse lens as they are often associated with negative stereotypes, further amplified by negative media representation, for instance, the persistent association of young black men with violence, criminality and gangs (Shankley and Rhodes 213). As a result, these minorities are subjected to exclusion and marginalisation. Moreover, the marginalised communities remain structurally disadvantaged, ranging from living in economically deprived areas to being more likely to face “negative outcomes” in their interactions with social and political institutions such as the criminal justice system, the healthcare system or the labour market (Shankley and Rhodes 228).

3.3 Brexit

The last twenty years have seen a rise in the “political mobilisation of racism and xenophobia” which may be also observed in relation to Brexit, the 2016 referendum. The politics of Brexit demonstrate that the sentiments concerning racism and xenophobia lie at the heart of the British “political mainstream” (Shankley and Rhodes 226). Shankley and Rhodes add that the decisions to support Brexit “comprise diverse political constituencies and political views”. Nonetheless, the issues of race, nation and immigration played a central role which is evident from both the campaign discourse and the social and political consequences (226). By way of illustration, the “Vote Leave” movement laid particular emphasis on the nostalgic glimpse of the British Empire and its dominance, while Nigel Farage’s “Leave.EU” campaign focused on the issue of immigration, using the “Breaking Point” poster which depicted Middle Eastern refugees lining up to enter Europe, portraying refugees as threats to the nation’s safety and security (Kinnvall 3; Shankley and Rhodes 226). What is more, the phrase “take back control of immigration” lied in the centre of the “Leave” campaign, demonising and dehumanising immigrants (Komaromi and Singh 9-10).

As for the repercussions of the referendum, there has been a significant rise in overt forms of racism, specifically, in racial violence and verbal abuse directed at migrants as well as established Black and other minorities (Booth; Komaromi and Singh 1; Shankley and Rhodes 227). The frequent post-referendum verbal racial abuse includes “Go home! We

voted you out!” “Leave!” or “Shouldn’t you be packing your bags?” (Komaromi and Singh 7). Additionally, Booth reports that, according to *The Guardian* survey results, the number of people who have experienced racial discrimination has increased from 58%, in 2016 prior to the EU vote, to 71% in 2019, with individuals from the Black community registering the sharpest rise from 59% in 2016 to 74% in 2019.

All in all, the racial relations in contemporary British society have been undoubtedly shaped by its historical legacies since the racial diversity was mainly influenced by the nation’s imperial past, colonialism and subsequent immigration (Shankley et al. 15). Therefore, it is essential to know and understand the history of the British Empire in order to grasp the racial inequalities which were created hundreds of years ago as a justification of dehumanisation and exploitation of racial minorities (Shankley and Rhodes 229-230). While throughout the history, the UK has taken measures to tackle racial disparities, substantial obstacles still persist. Furthermore, recent years have indicated a certain regression in the country’s pursuit of racial equality. This aspect may be demonstrated by the consequences of Brexit and the growing endorsement of far right and right-wing populist parties, such as the UK Independence Party, the English Defence League or the British National Party who advocate for stricter immigration controls, rejection of multiculturalism, creating a sense of hostility and intolerance of racial and ethnic minorities (Kinnvall 1; Shankley and Rhodes 222, 228). Kinnvall states that racism is often generated by the feeling of insecurity, fear and threat. Whether this threat is reasonable or not is overshadowed by its discursive interpretation. In other words, the social construct of threat and fear may be equally emotionally damaging as other economic or physical perils. In political terms, immigrants and racial minorities are more likely to be excluded if perceived as threats to the nation’s cultural identity and safety, which is the reason why the “imaginary protection” against the “others” has been transformed into a popular populist rhetoric (Kinnvall 3).

PRACTICAL PART

The practical part of this thesis begins with the introduction of two contemporary British literary works and their respective authors, namely *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. The following chapters strive to demonstrate the instances of overt and covert racism, which were presented in the theoretical part, in the two selected novels in order to comment on the different manifestations of racism and their impact. Moreover, this section portrays how literature may serve as a tool for raising awareness of racial issues, giving voice to racial minorities. The practical part draws on the definitions and findings provided by the theoretical part and other secondary sources.

4 *Queenie* (2019) by Candice Carty-Williams

This chapter aims to present a concise overview of Candice Carty-Williams's life and work, focusing on her globally acclaimed novel *Queenie*, which will be further analysed in the following chapters. Apart from a short synopsis of *Queenie*, this chapter also sheds light on the inspirations that fuelled the creative process of the novel, providing a deeper understanding of the context that shaped the literary work. Grasping the context will enable the reader to identify the messages the writer aims to convey through the literary work.

4.1 Candice Carty-Williams

Candice Carty-Williams was born in South London in 1989. Her mother is of Jamaican Indian descent while her father is Jamaican. Apart from being a writer, Carty-Williams is also a showrunner and culture writer, having written for *The Guardian*, *Vogue*, *The Face* and many more publications. What is more, the author is responsible for the establishment of the inclusive *The Guardian* and 4th Estate BAME Short Story Prize which recognises racial and minority ethnic authors who have been underrepresented and neglected (*Candice Carty-Williams*).

Among her most prominent works, one may find the young adult novella *Empress and Aniya*, *People Person*, and notably, *Queenie*, a “Book of the Year Award winning and *Sunday Times* bestselling” novel (*Candice Carty-Williams*).

Queenie was “a breakthrough hit”, depicted as “vital”, “disarmingly honest” and “boldly political” (Candice Carty-Williams; Tagen-Dye). Candice Carty-Williams clarifies that the story is not “political” in the sense that the protagonist engages in the political life, it rather echoes the nature of the life of Black women in the Western world as being political (Buzzfeed UK, 00:00:38-00:01:06). Furthermore, the author states that she drew inspiration from her experience as a Black woman, in her mid-twenties, having to navigate through life’s challenges, including family life, workplace environment, relationships and mental health (Passmore; *Who is Autor Candice Carty-Williams?*). In an interview for *People Magazine*, Carty-Williams stated “What do I know best? I know women. I know Black women. I know what it means to not have all the answers, and to be a mess, and to be trying your best and it not really working out for you” (Tagen-Dye). Carty-Williams adds that the narrative is about women and female friendships while the men in the story are “inconsequential”, which is the reason why all of them have three-lettered names (Buzzfeed UK, 00:00:07-00:00:28). The author further asserts that *Queenie*’s story may help fellow Black women feel less alienated, while also educating non-Black readers about the Black culture. Moreover, the novel highlights that Black women can also be “shy, funny, goofy, silly” and they do not have to be “strong all the time” (Buzzfeed UK, 00:02:23-00:02:54). In doing so, the novel challenges the stereotypical depiction of Black women, providing a more nuanced portrayal which demonstrates that Black women are complex individuals who can also be vulnerable and sensitive. Lastly, owing to its success, *Queenie* was adapted into a television series, aired on BBC one and Netflix (*Candice Carty-Williams*).

As for the literary work itself, *Queenie* (2019) follows the life of the eponymous female protagonist Queenie Jenkins, a 25-year-old British-Jamaican journalist. Throughout the novel, Queenie Jenkins tackles the intricacies of her love life, friendships, toxic relationships, cultural differences and career aspirations. In addition, the novel delves into the issues of mental health, intergenerational clash and race (“Queenie”; Tagen-Dye). Set in South London, the novel depicts the “casual and not-so-casual racism and the complexities of multiculturalism” (*Who Is Author Candice Carty-Williams?*).

5 *Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Azumah Nelson

The objective of this chapter is to present a brief overview of Caleb Azumah Nelson's life and fairly new yet promising literary career. The attention will be placed on his novel *Open Water*, delivering a summary of the plot and the key influences that shaped the literary work. While *Open Water* is Nelson's literary debut, the novel delivers a touching depiction of the challenges Black men face in contemporary British society, delving deeply into the emotional and psychological burdens.

5.1 Caleb Azumah Nelson

Caleb Azumah Nelson is a British-Ghanian writer and photographer, currently living in South-East London. *Open Water*, a number-one *Times* bestseller, is his debut novel, published in 2021, winning the Costa First Novel Award and Debut of the Year at the British Book Awards. Other than *Open Water*, Nelson also wrote a novel *Small Worlds*, published in 2023 (*Caleb Azumah Nelson*).

On the question of the “catalyst” for the production of *Open Water*, Nelson stated that he had already been writing non-fiction works about photography, music, Blackness, love, freedom and where Black people should search for this freedom. These aspects then later prompted the creative process of *Open Water* (*TheVoiceNewspaper*, 00:00:35-00:01:40). Nelson adds that in the case of *Open Water*, love was one of the sources of freedom. In addition, the author explores the theme of vulnerability and how Black men “struggle to express the hurt they are feeling” and how this further impacts their relationships (*TheVoiceNewspaper*, 00:05:50-00:07:51). The notion of vulnerability is also reflected in the title of the novel as Nelson explains that it is the “openness” in everyday life that Black people are not always fortunate to have due to the hardship and trauma hidden in the “water” (*TheVoiceNewspaper*, 00:09:30-00:10:45).

As for *Open Water* (2021), the novel follows the life of an unnamed male protagonist, with the story set in South-East London. The story unfolds with the encounter between the main character and an unnamed female counterpart, both being young Black British artists. The novel embarks on a poignant exploration of race, racism, mental health and masculinity as the main character struggles in the world where he is perceived merely as a “Black body”.

Moreover, the novel examines how these hardships affect his relationships (*Caleb Azumah Nelson*).

6 Overt Racism

The following subchapters will present the depiction of overt racism in two significant contemporary literary works: *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. The novels will be analysed separately to highlight instances of overt racism that impacted the protagonists' lives and those close to them, affecting aspects, such as mental health, self-esteem and their interpersonal relationships.

6.1 Overt Racism in *Queenie*

Overt racism can be expressed through many forms, in the case of *Queenie*, it adopted mainly the forms of racial slurs, racial humour and sexualisation. In addition, providing direct quotations from the novel might enable the readers to grasp the context and the implications of overt racism more thoroughly.

6.1.1 Racial Slurs in *Queenie*

Racial slurs are one of the most recognisable expressions of overt racism which are still being employed in contemporary society. The impact of racial slurs is undeniably harmful; however, their use tends to be justified claiming that they are “just words”. In terms of *Queenie*, the rarity of explicit racial slurs creates a shocking effect, intensifying its implications. It also serves as a reminder that racial slurs still exist and are used, drawing attention to its offensiveness. A clear illustration of this notion takes the form of a “joke” uttered by a relative of *Queenie*'s boyfriend:

“He was joking, *Queenie*, don't get so worked up!’ Adam scoffed. ‘And the character is actually black, so-’”

“Your uncle just said, ‘Was it the nigger in the pantry?’ and you've got nothing to say?” (Carty-Williams 43).

The deeply offensive racial slur employed in this extract is, or it should be evident, the N-word. As demonstrated by *Queenie*'s reaction, she needs to highlight how problematic the word is and how uncomfortable it makes her feel. It is then difficult to decide what is more startling – the use of the word by her boyfriend's relative or the necessity for *Queenie* to bring attention to it only for her reaction to be dismissed and labelled as over the top.

Furthermore, she points out how twisted it is that she seems to be the only one who recognises the word as offensive: “Am I in some alternative universe?” (Carty-Williams 43). It should also be noted that even her boyfriend showed no signs of concern about her emotions causing Queenie to feel betrayed and disappointed. This aspect also highlights the challenges in interracial relationships where the parties may not be sufficiently educated about racial issues, leading to a lack of empathy and understanding.

One would assume that since Queenie is the only Black person in the situation, therefore, the only person directly affected by the term, her objections would have been recognised as valid. Thus, what should have followed was an apology or at least an acknowledgement that the use of the word was ignorant. However, no one present defends her or even remotely attempts to take her view into consideration. On the contrary, they try to downplay the seriousness of the term and suggest that Queenie is simply overreacting, and she is being oversensitive and uptight. As a matter of fact, Adam attempts to justify the use of the word by asserting “the character is actually black”, disregarding the negative connotations of the word. These reactions clearly imply a lack of empathy, self-reflection and awareness of racial issues if not deep-rooted racism and emotional abuse.

What may be well-observed from this extract is that what the uncle said is undeniably racist. Even if the other family members failed to recognise it does not make it less racist. Therefore, one should not hide behind “I did not mean it like that”, but rather acknowledge the impact of one’s choice of words and take accountability.

Carty-Williams vividly captures the common use of racial slurs and challenges the power dynamic as Queenie refuses to accept the casual racism and the dismissiveness of the participants. On the contrary, Queenie maintained her stance by directly confronting the issue. It should also be noted that the presented situation mirrors real-life situations where racial offences tend to be trivialised and normalised. Moreover, it demonstrates how the victim’s responses are regularly undermined, labelled as emotional. What is also striking in this instance, is the casual delivery of the term as if it was simply a word like any other. This seemingly causal employment of racial slurs emphasises the pervasive nature of racism in everyday interactions. In addition, it depicts how easy it is to disguise racial slurs under humour, which will be further discussed in the following subchapter.

6.1.2 Racial Humour in *Queenie*

Another form of overt racism identified in *Queenie* is the use of racial humour. The issue with humour in general is the widespread belief that it is acceptable to joke about anything and everything. Therefore, even if the jokes are racist and hurtful, they tend to be normalised. Moreover, racial jokes usually occur in a casual or friendly setting, creating a social pressure to “go along” with the joke as to not disrupt the mood. An instance of racial humour can be detected during a gathering with Tom’s family:

‘How will we split this? I think...’ Stephen said slowly ‘... that everyone should do dark shirts versus light shirts’”

“‘Mmm, no so fast, Queenie!’ Stephen said”

“‘I’m wearing a white dress,’ I said, my voice very small.”

“‘But technically there’s a bit more dark on you,’ he laughed looking around the room in the hope that everyone would join in. (Carty-Williams 157)

The present extract captures *Queenie* during another gathering with Tom’s family. As someone who is not officially part of the family, *Queenie* may already feel like an outsider. On top of that, being the only Black person present likely intensifies the feeling of alienation and it may also contribute to her sense of insecurity. In fact, it is her skin colour which draws Stephen’s attention.

Stephen feels the urge to make a “humorous” comment on *Queenie*’s skin colour despite not having any valid reason to do so. Perhaps, *Queenie* was simply an easy target since she is the only one who is noticeably “different”. Moreover, humour about physical appearance at the expense of Black people is not uncommon which may have been another prompt for Stephen’s joke. What may have also influenced the situation is the family setting, where Stephen feels comfortable enough to single *Queenie* out. In fact, he expects others to join him, which fortunately does not happen. Nonetheless, the other family members do not show any signs of disapproval, nor do they console *Queenie*.

As it goes with humour and jokes, even the racially motivated ones are socially acceptable. What is more, racism is generally condemned if manifested in an explicitly heinous way, for instance, in a form of hate crimes. Therefore, in this case where racism is hidden behind

humour, it is rather challenging to denounce it. This fact is also visible from Queenie's reaction since she is not as vocal as she was when a racial slur was employed. Nevertheless, her reaction still demonstrates that the joke made her uncomfortable or even embarrassed.

Overall, what appears to be an innocent joke or banter, is in fact ignorant and insensitive. Even if humour is meant to be light-hearted, its effect can be and is hurtful. Hence, it is crucial to take into consideration the dignity of those at the receiving end of the joke. Furthermore, the extract highlights the societal tendency to disregard the impact of racially motivated jokes, sometimes even by those closest to you, such as Queenie's boyfriend in this situation.

Another racially motivated joke occurred during a date, made by Queenie's potential love interest: "He also dropped a slavery whipping joke" (Carty-Williams 360). Judging by Queenie's reflections on the joke: "*Proper* racist. He said some very questionable things last night" and "that made me want to set his house on fire" (Carty-Williams 360), the joke evidently made her upset and angry enough to not further entertain the relationship. Her reaction is completely justifiable as the joke is highly distasteful and degrading, not acknowledging her as a human being and mocking enslaved Black people.

What is more, as the joke was made in a sexual context, it clearly objectified and sexualised the female protagonist. In addition, taking into consideration the period of slavery and the fact that enslaved Black women were commonly raped, the man essentially implied that Queenie is his property, and she should be submissive, which is appalling. The man might have also indirectly conveyed his racist attitudes, perceiving Queenie as inferior to him.

All in all, having the impudence to utter such a joke suggests a great deal of ignorance and the failure to consider the consequences of this type of humour. Furthermore, by incorporating this joke in the novel, the author also sheds light on the issue of sexualisation and objectification of Black women which will be explored in the next chapter.

6.1.3 Sexualisation and Fetish in *Queenie*

Sexualisation and fetishisation can be racially motivated, targeting especially women of colour. It is also one of the most prominent racial issues which impinges on Queenie's life. After a failed relationship with Tom, Queenie strives to recover from her heartbreak by

engaging in various sexual relations in order to avoid having to address her emotions and trauma. However, her treatment by men is often degrading and she is perceived as a sexual object rather than a human being with feelings. Therefore, the negative experiences with men in her life strongly impinge on her well-being and confidence. Queenie addresses this issue during her therapy session:

“You know, when we go out, my friends get chatted up by guys who say, ‘I’d love to take you for dinner’, and in the same breath they come over to me, put their hand on my bum and tell me they want to take me back to theirs and fuck me over the arm of the sofa” (Carty-Williams 325).

The passage captures Queenie sharing her experience regarding interactions with men and how they treat her. The main protagonist depicts a situation during which her friends were approached with respect while she herself was treated in a highly sexual and, to an extent, humiliating manner. This discrepancy in the men’s behaviour suggests a certain “double standard” and raises questions as to why they showed different levels of respect and decency depending on the women they were interacting with. Furthermore, taking into consideration the crude and explicit proposition, Queenie’s experience demonstrates how she was yet again reduced to a sexual object, disregarding who she is as a human being.

Queenie being treated differently than her female friends understandably affect her self-perception, causing her to doubt her value. The reasons for the men’s differing approaches are not specified. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the oversexualised portrayal of Black women, commonly depicted as promiscuous, influenced the men’s conduct, possibly leading them to believe that their advances were desired. This aspect clearly demonstrates how detrimental racial stereotypes and false representations can be.

During the therapy session, Queenie also shares how she is usually described as “sexy”, which she clearly despises, considering her previous experiences (Carty-Williams 325). She further expresses her irritation that being sexy seems to be the only aspect which men perceive to be attractive about her, ironically suggesting that perhaps she should be “grateful for any attention at all” (Carty-Williams 325). Moreover, her unsuccessful love life, where men were only interested in having sex with her, reinforces the image that her personality and other attributes are not interesting enough or that they simply do not matter. Overall, her

growing bitterness and frustration highlight how exhausting it is to be seen only through a sexual lens as if there was nothing more to her worth than her body.

Racial sexualisation may also be disguised in a form of compliments: “‘Tastes like chocolate,’ he said as he left the living room” (Carty-William 355). The comment clearly has a sexual connotation which, again, oversexualises and fetishises Queenie, and Black women in general. Some may attempt to defend the compliment as well-meaning; however, the intention does not exactly matter when the impact is dehumanising, as it is in this scenario.

What is even more appalling was the man’s reaction to Queenie’s concerns over the comment, specifically, “‘The chocolate thing?’ He laughed nastily. ‘I knew you were one of those’”, referring to “One of those Black Lives Matter Girls” (Carty-Williams 325). His response clearly indicates that he did not consider his “compliment” to be problematic, even after Queenie pointed out that she did not find it flattering. On the contrary, he suggests that Queenie is one of those politically correct girls, implying that she is overreacting since he is “not racist or anything” (Carty-Williams 325). Nonetheless, feeling compelled to explicitly mention that he is not racist indicates that he is well aware that what he is saying is racist or at least highly controversial.

One should also take into consideration how racial sexualisation and fetish impinges on Queenie’s emotional well-being. Throughout the novel, Queenie is struggling with her mental health due to a number of reasons; however, sexual racism might be one of the leading causes since research has shown that women who have been the targets of racial sexual objectification are more prone to suffer from depressive symptoms (Stanton et al. 448).

Examining Queenie’s history with men reveals that her father was not present in her life, and her mother’s partner was abusive. Consequently, it could be assumed that her unhealthy relationships with men might stem from the absence of a father figure. As a result, Queenie appears to crave male validation, leading her to pursue relationships with men. Following her break up with Tom, Queenie begins having various sexual relations, possibly as a coping mechanism. However, while the sexual activities are consensual, the men are rather aggressive during the intimate moments. This may be due to the harmful generalisation that

Black women enjoy forceful physical intimacy, which is also rooted in oversexualisation and objectification. Moreover, even when Queenie is not seeking sexual encounters, men still sexualise or objectify her, further exacerbating her psychological well-being. As a result, Queenie suffers from depression and anxiety, eventually prompting her to seek professional help. Therefore, it is evident that sexual racism is damaging and impacts the victim's self-worth.

6.2 Overt Racism in *Open Water*

In *Open Water* – the instances of overt racism are rather limited as the narrative focuses almost exclusively on covert racism. This is partly connected with the impressionist nature of the narrative as well as the author intending to raise awareness about the insidious essence of racism that permeates everyday interactions and institutional practices and gets almost imperceptibly imprinted in the individuals. Nevertheless, there are still some noticeable manifestations of overt racism, specifically, in the forms of racial slurs and racial humour, which will be explored.

6.2.1 Racial Slurs in *Open Water*

As already mentioned before, racial slurs are still used in contemporary society, and they are still as offensive and hurtful. While there are no explicit instances of racial slurs in *Open Water*, one may still notice the allusion to what is likely to be the N-word: “others wanting to co-opt a word they dare not to say in your presence, like they have not plucked enough from you” (Nelson 103).

The unnamed protagonist reflects on the racial issues that cause him sleepless nights, which indicates the power racial slurs still have. It could be assumed that what the protagonist refers to is the N-word in view of the fact that people tend avoid the use of this word if a member of the Black community is present. Considering that the N-word is a deeply offensive racial slur with a long history, people should not use this word altogether. However, some still employ this term as a form of attack, insult or to simply describe a Black person. What worries the protagonist is the fact that others might refrain from using the word in front of him but are likely to use it when he is not present, which reflects a deep sense of unease and

threat from others. Nevertheless, as the use of this word among non-Black people is not stigmatised, it is less likely to be pointed out as problematic and eradicated.

What is more, “others wanting to co-opt a word” demonstrate that some people even strive to appropriate this term, arguing that the word is still employed by the Black community. For instance, the term is widely mentioned by Black rappers in their works, prompting non-Black people to claim that simply repeating the lyrics should be acceptable. Given these circumstances, why should it not be appropriate for everybody to use? Historically, this derogatory term was used by White people to dehumanise and demean enslaved Black people. In their eyes, Black people were not seen as human beings, they were regarded rather as objects or animals which can be bought and sold (“Straight Talk About the N-Word”; Wilson). Nowadays, the use of the N-word within the Black community serves as a means of reclaiming and redefining the term. Thus, as already mentioned in the theoretical part, when employed by Black individuals, it may convey fondness or solidarity¹. For this reason, it may be argued that the term has a different meaning when employed by Black people as they share a certain bond.

The author illustrates how non-Black people wish to normalise the use of the N-word, either through ignorance or by purposefully ignoring its historical and cultural significance. Furthermore, this quote from *Open Water* embodies the question of why they find this term so attractive in the first place. Perhaps it is a question of ignorance, but it could also be a matter of internalised racism and the tendency to retain power and control, which perpetuates oppression and continuing systemic abuse. Given the nature of the narration, this single mention may be viewed as a minimalist hint at overt racism, which is sufficient to stress the growing isolation and discomfort the protagonist feels in public and from the White community.

6.2.2 Racial Humour in *Open Water*

Another form of overt racism which the main character portrays as a source of frustration and anxiety is racial humour. Considering the character’s well-being, even racial jokes cause

¹ See chapter 2.1.2 Racial Slurs

psychological and emotional distress, highlighting the importance of treating this often-downplayed form of racism with due seriousness.

The main protagonist recalls how the jokes are made at his expense, usually “implying a criminality or lack of intellect” (Nelson 103). This experience reflects how racist attitudes and behaviours can be expressed through humour and thus easily perpetuated. The issue is that jokes, whether they are racially motivated or not, are generally regarded as a form of entertainment and a part of social interactions. Therefore, even when a joke is a form of microaggression, as is the case mentioned by the protagonist, one may simply respond “I was just joking” and if the targets of the joke continue to object, their concerns may be dismissed and labelled as uptight.

Furthermore, the main protagonist mentions that the racial humour directed at him is associated with the topic of “criminality or lack of intellect”. This aspect reflects that the jokes have been racially motivated as they are based on the widespread belief that Black people have criminal tendencies or the misconception that Black individuals are inherently less intelligent². What needs to be stressed is that the choice of the particular content is certainly intentional and not random, insinuating that the perpetrators are aware of the harm they may cause. Consequently, such jokes reinforce harmful stereotypes about the Black community, reducing the main protagonist to a generalised portrayal, completely disregarding his individuality and abilities.

All in all, Nelson depicts how draining “simple” jokes can be and how racial humour creates a hostile environment for racial minorities. This hostility affects their sense of self and belonging, which further impacts the mental health, overall well-being and safety of those concerned.

² See chapters 2.2.5 Racial Stereotypes, 3.2.1 Interpersonal Racism in the UK, 3.2.2 Institutional Racism in the UK

7 Covert Racism

This chapter will focus on the occurrences of covert racism in two literary works, *Queenie* by Candice-Carty Williams and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. The following subchapters will be dedicated to the individual examinations of each work, demonstrating the detrimental impact of this subtle form racism on the lives of the protagonists and those around them.

7.1 Covert Racism in *Queenie*

The following subchapters will demonstrate how covert racism manifested through colourism, racial insensitivity, racial microaggressions, racial stereotypes and police brutality in *Queenie*. Moreover, including direct examples of covert racism from the novel may provide a deeper understanding of this subtle form of racism.

7.1.1 Colourism in *Queenie*

Colourism is an insidious form of racism targeting dark-skinned Black people, in this case, the main protagonist Queenie. This subtle form of racism demonstrates that even the shade of a person's skin colour or physical features may result in a differential treatment. An example of colourism can be recognised in the comments made by Tom's grandmother:

‘Oh, you two will have beautiful children’, Tom's grandmother said, staring at us from across the table” followed by “Your lovely soft brown skin, Queenie, but lighter. Like a lovely milky coffee. Not too dark! And Tom's green eyes. Your big hair, Queenie, those dark eyelashes, but Tom's nice nose’, I looked around to see if anyone else at the table was shocked by what she said, but apparently it was acceptable. (Carty-Williams 7-8)

Tom's grandmother's comment may be interpreted as covertly racist due to the presence of some problematic elements. To illustrate this point, when she says “Your lovely soft brown skin, Queenie, but lighter. Like a lovely milky coffee. Not too dark!”, she is essentially implying that lighter skin is better than darker skin tones, putting the concept of “whiteness” on a pedestal. Put simply, she is insinuating that Queenie's skin colour would be better if it was closer to white.

Aside from skin colour, colourism may also target facial features, such as flatness of a nose, hence, the comment “Tom’s nice nose”. Noses are one of the typical features which Black people are mocked for since they are usually not as dainty and straight according to the European beauty standards. By making such comments, Tom’s grandmother is selecting which of Queenie’s features are good enough and should be passed down to her great-grandchildren. One should also highlight the completely casual tone with which the comments are made as if criticising ethnic features was nothing out of the ordinary.

The comments are clearly inconsiderate and discriminatory as they promote the superiority of European beauty standards rendering certain ethnic features to be undesirable. However, as Tom’s grandmother uses some positive attributes such as “lovely” and adds a few compliments, the ignorant remarks are left unnoticed. Therefore, it is evident that Tom and his relatives failed to acknowledge the impact of the grandmother’s words on Queenie’s perception of herself. Particularly, that she is not pretty enough and that she has to alter her appearance in order to be accepted by mainstream society. Thus, Queenie once again encountered tactless comments from her boyfriend’s family, having to accept that no one took her feelings into consideration. This lack of empathy and racial sensitivity will be further explored in a separate subchapter.

Colourism may also occur in a more formal setting, such as a workplace environment, indicating that racism also permeates institutions. In the novel, this institutional level of colourism is perpetuated by an HR assistant during Queenie’s induction:

“‘You’re very lucky to be working here. There are other like you, except not the same colour,’ I wasn’t sure that I was hearing her properly so asked her to repeat what she’d said” and “You know! There are darker ones, but they’re in IT” (Carter-Williams 182).

In this scenario, Queenie is made to feel that she should be grateful for receiving the opportunity to work in the firm in spite of her skin colour. This indicates that it is rare that someone who looks like her managed to obtain that sort of job position, disregarding her achievements and qualifications.

What is more, the HR assistant basically suggests that the shade of an individual's skin colour is linked to a specific work position. This means that certain jobs are exclusively allocated to individuals of particular skin tones. One of many issues which arises as a consequence is that it fuels the negative stereotype that Black individuals are not as intelligent or qualified. However, the reality is that they are simply denied equal opportunities. In other words, despite having the adequate education or qualification, the job applicants may still not be hired due to the colour of their skin. Therefore, some occupations may simply be unattainable no matter the effort one puts in. Moreover, even if they do get the job, they will have to work harder than their colleagues from more privileged backgrounds and still it is not guaranteed that they will achieve the same level of success or recognition.

Queenie appears to be shocked by the assistant's comment since what she stated was racist and out of order, providing her the opportunity to reflect on what she said, apologise or at least rephrase. However, the assistant just casually adds another racist remark, clearly not realising that she is being ignorant and discriminatory. This reflects that some people choose to be blind to racism, normalising discriminatory treatment.

Carty-Williams employs this instance to emphasise that racism is not just personally mediated. In fact, it may operate at a higher, institutional level. What is concerning is that institutional racism implements discriminatory practices and policies that lead to unfair treatment and unequal employment opportunities for the Black and other racial and ethnic communities. Therefore, in order to achieve equity within the workplace environment, it is necessary to recognise the existence of institutional racism and the need for broader societal changes.

7.1.2 Racial Insensitivity in *Queenie*

Throughout the novel, Queenie experiences dismissive reactions from others when she attempts to highlight racist behaviour and attitudes. These situations portray how a lack of empathy or understanding contributes to normalisation of racism. As a matter of fact, covert racism can also take on the form of insensitive attitudes towards racial issues and the harsh reality experienced by racial minorities. This form of racism is evident in the reactions of Tom and his family to Queenie's concerns and objections:

‘Your lovely soft brown skin, Queenie, but lighter. Like a lovely milky coffee. Not too dark! And Tom’s green eyes. Your big hair, Queenie, those dark eyelashes, but Tom’s nice nose’, I looked around to see if anyone else at the table was shocked by what she said, but apparently it was acceptable. (Carty-Williams 7-8)

Aside from colourism, which was explored in the previous chapter, there is another problematic aspect in this passage. Specifically, the casual delivery of the comments combined with the absence of reaction from other family members, especially from Tom, Queenie’s boyfriend.

The fact that nobody present “was shocked” by the comments indicate that such views and statements are normalised, and therefore, acceptable. As a result, Queenie might have felt alienated and even disappointed in her boyfriend’s family. In addition, since the conversation addresses her future children, she has to take into consideration that her children could also be subjected to the same treatment and criticism. This raises further doubts regarding her relationship with Tom.

Furthermore, what other participants viewed as an appropriate conversation had a significant impact on Queenie, prompting her to ask Tom whether there is anything wrong with her nose, referring to his grandmother’s comment. This evidently demonstrates that the remarks made her insecure and they were not harmless. However, instead of giving her validation and attempting to understand her perspective, he simply states: “Ignore her, she’s just being old, isn’t she” (Carty-Williams 8). This reaction indicates that Tom does not put any thought into the situation as he simply dismisses Queenie’s concerns, further invalidating her justifiable feelings. What is more, Tom’s way of handling the problem conveys an unfamiliarity with this type of racism and a failure to recognise its consequences.

This situation illustrates the common way of addressing racism, or rather, not addressing it at all as some people believe that one should simply not pay attention to racist behaviour as it would not solve anything. The issue is that only people who are not being victimised by racism can afford to ignore it. Moreover, overlooking a problem does not mean that the problem will cease to exist. Lastly, by ignoring racial insensitivity and by failing to address this issue, one essentially enables it and, thus, becomes complicit (Medina 191).

Another instance of racial insensitivity may be recognised during a family birthday party when Tom's uncle uses the N-word³:

“He was joking, Queenie, don't get so worked up!’ Adam scoffed. ‘And the character is actually black, so-’”

“Your uncle just said, ‘Was it the nigger in the pantry?’ and you've got nothing to say?” (Carty-Williams 43).

This situation illustrates that except for Queenie, there is no condemnation of the use of the highly offensive racial slur. In fact, Tom's family members attempt to diminish the seriousness of the situation by stating “You're not going to take that seriously, are you?” (Carty-Williams 43). In other words, they imply that there is no valid reason for her reaction since they are just “having fun” (Carty-Williams 43), basically gaslighting her. Moreover, although Tom's uncle is the one who is undeniably in the wrong, the family's criticism is directed at Queenie, claiming that she is being “so politically correct” (Carty-Williams 43). This comment is unfortunately not surprising as it has become ubiquitous in contemporary society, employed to attack those who dare to point out racism or any other form of discrimination.

Additionally, what might have been the most hurtful aspect, was Tom's behaviour. He is Queenie's boyfriend, thus, he is supposed to be the person who is supportive of her and who cares for her. However, instead of defending Queenie, he attacks her by saying: “Why have you always got to take this stuff so seriously?” (Carty-Williams 44), again, placing the blame on Queenie. Tom even attempts to justify his uncle's behaviour, claiming that “he's from a generation where they said the n-word quite a lot” (Carty-Williams 45). Tom's excuse for his uncle demonstrates a great deal of ignorance as he fails to realise that it was never appropriate to use the N-word. Put differently, simply because the term used to be widely employed does not overshadow the fact that it has always been offensive. On another note, it is not clear what was the motivation behind Tom's disappointing behaviour, whether he genuinely believes that the N-word is acceptable or perhaps he fears being ostracised or mocked by his family. Either way, his reaction was hurtful and ignorant.

³ See chapter 6.1.1 Racial Slurs in *Queenie*

One would assume that in this situation, it is evident who is at fault. However, the author presents how easy it is to turn a situation around, portraying the victim to be the villain. As a result, not only is Queenie hurt and angry about the racial slur, but she is also made to feel that she is being overly sensitive and exaggerating the entire matter. What is thus palpable from this situation is its absurdity. By portraying this instance in such an absurd and satirical manner, Carty-Williams highlights the common tendency to rationalise and trivialise racist behaviour. Furthermore, the author demonstrated how satire and irony may serve as powerful weapons, challenging why certain demeanour is perceived as acceptable, prompting readers to reflect on their own attitudes regarding the complex issue that racism is.

7.1.3 Racial Microaggressions in *Queenie*

Another form of covert racism which may be found in *Queenie* is racial microaggression. The occurrences of racial microaggressions in the novel are not isolated, shedding light on its pervasive and diverse nature.

During Queenie and Tom's first encounter, Tom asks her: "Do you live around here?", to which she replies: "I grew up not far from here" with Tom inquiring: "Oh, cool. Were you born here?" (Carty-William 36). The latter question may serve as a typical example of a microaggression. At first sight, it appears as an innocent question, and many would probably claim that Tom was simply interested in where Queenie is "originally" from. However, one should contemplate whether Tom would have asked the same question if Queenie was White.

What is more, one should consider the underlying conveyed message. By posing such a question, Tom challenges Queenie's Britishness due to her race. It also undermines Queenie's sense of belonging as it questions whether she can legitimately consider herself British. Furthermore, in view of Queenie's reaction "Yes. I know that I'm black but I wasn't born in nebulous Africa" (Carty-Williams 36), it is apparent that Queenie has encountered this question a number of times before and having to repeatedly prove that she is British enough, can understandably become irritating and exhausting.

Therefore, what some people regard as a normal question can be triggering for others. It is, hence, crucial to consider the different perspectives and take into account the possible implications.

Racial microaggression can also be expressed through what Sue et al. described as “denial of individual racism” (276). By way of illustration, “Don’t worry, my husband is black, so I know about you and your people” (Carty-Williams 183). This comment is made by the HR assistant at Queenie’s firm, after having said some distasteful remarks about Black people⁴. By doing so, the assistant insinuates that being married to a Black man provides her with an insight into the lives of the entire race, which is an extremely bold statement. Additionally, not only is she being presumptuous, but she also generalises the experiences of all Black people. Thus, it could be argued that this perception is misleading and further perpetuates inaccurate representations and harmful stereotypes about Black people.

Moreover, through that statement, the assistant implies that she cannot be racist since she is married to a Black man. The issue is that some people genuinely believe that associating with a person of colour means that they are not racist or that it gives them the right to make racist remarks. Furthermore, this aspect is commonly employed as means of avoiding taking responsibility. In reality, being anti-racist requires a profound education, not just an acquaintance with a Black person, moreover, simply knowing a Black person does not give one the right to speak on behalf of all of them.

Microaggression can also be manifested through colour blindness, the denial of a person of colour’s experience with racism as well as the refusal of “the history of white racial dominance” (Eddo-Lodge 83; Sue et al. 276). In *Queenie*’s case, an instance of colourism is noticeable during a conversation about the “Black Lives Matter” movement:

“‘All that Black Live Matter nonsense,’ an older man I recognised from the review supplement scoffed. ‘All lives matter’”

“‘What about the lives of Latinos, of Asians, the lives of – I’m white does my life not matter?’ he continued” (Carty-Williams 213).

⁴ See chapter 7.1.1. Colourism in *Queenie*

This extract captures a disagreement between Queenie and an elderly White man who criticises the “Black Lives Matter” movement and argues that all lives should matter not just Black ones. The man’s objections demonstrate that he misunderstood the purpose of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, as he assumes that focusing on Black people who are suffering at the moment implies that the lives of non-Black people are disposable. It also highlights the refusal to acknowledge the hardships of the Black community in comparison with other racial groups.

The “Black Lives Matter” movement aims to shed light on the maltreatment of Black people, often resulting in a number of senseless deaths at the hands of law enforcement officers. However, some have misinterpreted this term to be preaching that only Black lives matter which is certainly not the case. The essence of the “Black Lives Matter” campaign can be exemplified by Queenie’s response “It’s saying that black lives, at this point, and historically do not and have not mattered, and that they should!” (Carty-Williams 213). In other words, Black people have been and are still being mistreated and the purpose of the movement is to highlight this issue and the need for societal changes. Therefore, “Black Lives Matter” is not a “nonsense” as the man asserts, on the contrary, its existence demonstrates that the racial injustices will no longer be disregarded.

Moreover, the man emphasises that “all lives matter”, presumably referring to the slogan, which was created as a reaction, perhaps even as a criticism of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. The driving force behind the “All Lives Matter” countermovement is the belief that people are equal as there is only one race, the human race which is indeed true. Nonetheless, human beings are still divided into the socially constructed races, and they are being treated in accordance with this categorisation, thus, the concept of race cannot be disregarded. Furthermore, it appears that some lives have mattered more than others and until that is changed, all lives evidently do not matter.

This passage highlights how some people do not recognise their privileges and they do not acknowledge that some people are being mistreated due to their race. While human beings are equal and should be treated equally, the reality does not reflect this idea and it is fundamental to recognise the unjust treatment of racial minorities in order to repair the broken system.

The last case of racial microaggression selected for the purpose of this thesis concerns the Westernisation of ethnic names:

“How do you pronounce your name again?’ Cassandra asked.

“Chess. Keh,’ Kyazike said”

“Oh okay, like Jessica without the “ic” in the middle?’ Cassandra asked”

“No. Like my own name. Not some any Western name. Chess. Keh,’ she repeated”
(Carty-William 94).

At first glance, the challenge to pronounce someone’s name may seem harmless and not unusual. It could happen to anybody. However, if one takes into consideration the historical background and the process of Westernisation of ethnic names, there could be an underlying act of microaggression detected in this situation.

The Westernisation, in this case anglicisation of ethnic names dates back to the period of mass immigration when it was promoted as a form of integration. Individuals altered or completely changed their names in order to “blend in” and to avoid discrimination. As a result, they had to erase a part of their cultural identity to conform to the norm (Blckvanguard).

In this instance, Cassandra alters Kyazike’s name which is not typically English. She could have at least attempted to pronounce it. However, it was easier to immediately opt for an English version of Kyazike’s name rather than put effort in properly pronouncing it. By doing so, Cassandra overlooks the importance of Kyazike’s name and its tie to her identity. Moreover, such behaviour might imply that Kyazike’s ethnic name is inferior or less acceptable, prompting Cassandra to propose a “better”, English version. The extract also reflects a certain power dynamic, since this situation would have probably not occurred if Kyazike had been a White woman with a common name.

What is more, Queenie’s observation should be highlighted: “I’d spoken about Kyazike enough for Cassandra to have remembered” (Carty-Williams 94), further asserting that there is no doubt that Cassandra would have recalled the name if it was “Sarah or Rachel” (Carty-Williams 94). Therefore, Cassandra’s negligence to remember Kyazike’s name and her casual attempt to anglicise it indicates that she did not put much thought into the importance

of a person's name, failing to consider the possible implications. In addition, Kyazike's reaction suggests that she has encountered such a situation before. Due to this, Kyazike might feel a sense of irritation since remembering someone's name and pronouncing it in the correct way is a bare minimum and should not be perceived as an impossible task.

By Westernising a person's ethnic name, one may fail to recognise the individual's real identity and heritage (Blckvanguard). Furthermore, ethnic names are still being mocked due to ignorance and prejudice. Through this extract, Carty-Williams emphasises the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity and the need to denounce the dismissal and mispronunciation of ethnic names in order to be able to grasp its significance.

7.1.4 Racial Stereotypes in *Queenie*

Racial stereotypes, another expression of covert racism, continues to shape the perception and treatment of the Black community in modern society. The detrimental impact of these stereotypes cannot be stressed enough, as they significantly affect the everyday lives of Black individuals. In *Queenie*, several instances depict how these false representations influenced the way Queenie, and her friends were treated. This subchapter will delve into key examples of racial stereotypes in the novel.

This extract illustrates an altercation between Kyazike and Queenie, two Black women and a White woman who feels entitled to touch Queenie's hair without her permission, as if Queenie was an object:

We went to slide our way inside and were stopped by a drunk girl with short pink hair who reached out and ran her hands through my twists like they weren't attached to my scalp"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Kyazike said, grabbing the girl by the wrist and pushing her hand away"

"A bouncer with dyed red hair that matched a tight T-shirt straining over his muscles appeared suddenly from the darkness and put each of his giant hands on mine and Kyazike's shoulders"

"I was only being nice,' the blond girl said, looking with big blinking eyes at the bouncer"

“Right, you two, you’ll have to leave. (Carty-Williams 143-144)

Generally, Black women’s hair tends to draw attention due to its texture and volume. However, touching or even asking to touch a Black woman’s hair is inappropriate and rather strange. In a reversed scenario where a Black woman touched a White woman’s hair, people would certainly not be as indifferent to it.

In this situation, the White woman is clearly being highly invasive and disrespectful as she has violated Queenie’s personal space and boundaries. However, the bouncer does not give Kyazike and Queenie the space to defend themselves and simply reacts based on the White woman’s excuse “I was only being nice”. Instead, the bouncer instantly assumes that the two Black women are the ones who have initiated the conflict, and thus, they are the ones facing repercussions. This immediate reaction is presumably due to the widespread association of the Black community with aggression, violence and criminality.

For Queenie and Kyazike, this situation must be undoubtedly frustrating since they did not do anything wrong, yet they were punished. How can one be a good person and still be treated like a criminal? This infuriating situation creates a sense of hopelessness and emphasises how influential stereotypes can be and how important it is to overcome them.

As mentioned before, racial stereotypes are not harmless. In fact, they can infiltrate into every aspect of a person’s life. In Queenie’s case, the way she is stereotypically perceived by society, simply because she is a Black woman profoundly impacts her entire life and has a detrimental effect on her mental health:

‘I can’t wake up and not be a black woman, Janet. I can’t walk into a room and not be a black woman, Janet. On the bus, on the tube, at work, in the canteen. Loud, brash sassy, angry, mouthy, confrontational, bitchy’”

“‘There are ones people think are nice, though: well spoken, surprisingly intelligent, exotic. My favourite is sexy,’ I think. I guess I should be grateful for any attention at all. (Carty-Williams 325)

This passage evokes a strong feeling of frustration and perhaps even anger. Initially, Queenie presents all the negative stereotypes she is associated with, which most Black woman are described as. However, these traits do not reflect who she is or who she chose to be as they

were imposed on her by societal prejudices. What is more, she highlights how she cannot seem to escape these labels despite her best efforts, demonstrating how constraining they are. It is also evident that the inability to separate her racial identity from her everyday life has taken an emotional toll on her well-being.

Furthermore, Queenie mentions that when she is described in a positive light, it occurs with a comment of how surprising it is. This implies the stereotype that Black women are less intelligent or articulate and it is rather unusual that they are so “well spoken”. These remarks suggest that the speaker had already low expectations about Queenie solely because she is Black, undermining her hard work and achievements. In addition, Queenie mentions that she tends to be depicted as “exotic” or “sexy”, which seemingly appears to be positive; nevertheless, it also insinuates a great deal of objectification and sexualisation⁵. Therefore, even when “positive” traits are ascribed to her, they are done in a manner that diminishes her worth.

This excerpt demonstrates how exhausting it is for Queenie to be presented as someone she is not, to be reduced to a stereotype. Her feelings are completely understandable since her personality and individuality are being disregarded due to this unified portrayal of Black women. The author illustrates how damaging it is to limit human beings into these one-dimensional identities, denying their complexity and diversity. Thus, it is crucial to not judge people based on societal expectations or representation as they can be misleading and inaccurate.

Lastly, Queenie has also faced a question concerning the deeply ingrained stereotype of Black women exploiting government assistance, specifically: “At one point he asked if I agreed that young black women got pregnant just so they could get council houses” (Carty-Williams 360).

This proposition unfairly stigmatises Black women, portraying them as lazy and dishonest. The speaker essentially implies that young Black women use their reproductive systems in order to take advantage of state benefits, which is incredibly presumptuous of him.

⁵ See chapter 6.1.3 Sexualisation and Fetish in *Queenie*

Moreover, making these false accusations may impinge on the women's social standing, and overall well-being.

In addition, this stereotype together with the stereotypical perception of coloured immigrants posing as a threat to society further reinforce the negative perception of Black individuals to be trying to take advantage of the system. As a result, the Black community continues to be viewed through a negative lens, which benefits political agendas.

Once again, Carty-Williams presents a situation in an absurd light, employing satire and irony to emphasise how outrageous some views can be. What is more, while these beliefs are unfounded and evidently preposterous, the author indicates that they can still be widespread, influencing the perception of Black women.

7.1.5 Police Brutality in *Queenie*

One of the most violent acts of racism in contemporary society is the law enforcement's disproportionate use of violent practices against the Black community. This covert form of racism is also addressed in the novel as Queenie and Kyazike prepare to attend the "Black Lives Matter" march, depicting the fear and disapproval of racial injustice and systemic abuse of power by authorities:

'Kyazike, are they going to kill us all?' I asked angrily. 'For doing nothing. Nothing at all. For just being. For being black in the wrong place, at the wrong time? I hate it'"

"It's unfair, it hurts my heart. Who will police the police?" (Carty-Williams 207).

"'The system is against us.' She said, her voice strong but close to breaking. You cannot, you must not, brutalise the black body, but that is what we are seeing. It is all we are seeing. That is the message we are given. And it is traumatising. Our people continue to suffer. The trauma is too heavy for use to bear. (Carty-Williams 209)

The passage mirrors Queenie's fear and anger of potentially being a victim of police brutality simply for being Black. She asserts that just her existence puts her in danger and there is nothing she can do to prevent it, contemplating whether this is the inevitable fate of the whole race. Her concerns are legitimate considering the fact that Black individuals are

subjected to racial profiling and higher levels of policing⁶. This practice is unsurprisingly also rooted in the stereotypical association of Black individuals with criminality.

What is more, it reflects the reality that the police are prone to use excessive force when engaging with the Black community. This could be put down to the perception of Black people as aggressive. Moreover, some people, including the authorities might still hold the view that Black individuals are just objects or animals, justifying their barbaric behaviour. Otherwise, how else could anyone be capable of treating another human in such a heinous way? What is even more tragic is the fact that this unjust use of force has ultimately resulted in senseless deaths of innocent people⁷.

This extract also highlights the systemic level of racism where the whole criminal justice system is questioned. It addresses the issue regarding who will hold the law enforcement accountable when they misuse their power. This is a reasonable question given how long this has been going on and still there have not been any substantial changes. Furthermore, one can feel the permeating sense of pain and helplessness since those in power, those who are meant to protect, are the ones harming and murdering people.

Carty-Williams portrays the hopelessness and unfairness of having to live in fear on account of one's skin colour. She emphasises how traumatising and unbearable it is to experience and witness police brutality and how outrageous it is, that this is the harsh reality the Black community is forced to exist in. This instance also demonstrates how deeply ingrained racism is and how fundamental it is to address this life-threatening issue in order to prevent the killings of innocent people.

7.2 Covert Racism in *Open Water*

As mentioned before, racism is not always blatant and explicit, in fact, it also occurs in more hidden, insidious manners. The author subtly incorporates this form of racism into the narrative, highlighting its pernicious nature. This approach makes the instances of covert racism difficult to detect at first; however, overtime, its presence becomes overwhelming and impossible to ignore. Concerning *Open Water*, covert racism emerges most noticeably

⁶ See chapter 3.2.2. Institutional Racism in the UK

⁷ See chapters 2.2.6 Racial Profiling, 2.2.7 Police Brutality

in the forms of shunning, racial stereotypes, racial microaggressions, racial profiling and police brutality.

7.2.1 Shunning in *Open Water*

Among the forms of covert racism which have occurred in *Open Water*, one may find some manifestations of shunning and its modifications. Detecting this type of racism is rather challenging due to its informal nature. The issue is that some people could simply argue that who they want or do not want to associate with is simply a personal choice⁸. However, if these decisions are influenced by racial stereotypes or prejudice, causing a person of colour to feel excluded or invisible, it is racism. This experience of not fully belonging was expressed by the main character's romantic partner:

“‘What was being at school like for you?’ you ask”

“It was ... a lot. I never felt unwelcome but there was always something I didn't feel privy to” (Nelson 24).

The presented extract depicts a conversation between the main character and his love interest (both unnamed). This situation does not reflect shunning in its strictest form as the woman asserts that she did not feel “unwelcome”, presumably conveying that there was no overt hostility or complete exclusion. Nonetheless, the extract still reflects an underlying feeling of discomfort surrounding her school years. This could be put down to the fact that there were still some situations during which she did not feel necessarily included. This aspect demonstrates that one does not have to experience open hostility in order to feel like an outcast.

As the pair continues their conversation, the woman shares that she was one of only three Black people in the entire school (Nelson 25), suggesting a limited representation, meaning that there were not many people who she could relate to. Moreover, being a Black student in a predominantly non-Black school environment may have contributed to her sense of isolation and loneliness. Additionally, during school years, one usually prefers to blend in with the majority, which was not possible for the female character due to her physical

⁸ See chapter 2.2.1 Shunning

appearance, possibly creating a division with other students. As a result, she may have also experienced a sense of otherness and not belonging.

This passage captures the feeling of not being fully integrated into a school environment. The author depicts how a young student's experience left a long-lasting impact on an adult woman, which continues to shape her life. Therefore, it could be assumed that the sense of not belonging and being different experienced in one's youth can further impact one's self-perception and interpersonal relationships.

Shunning may also be detected in another part of the novel. The main character has a conversation with Leon, his barber, about life in Ghana where their families are originally from. Leon has recently returned from Ghana stating: "You don't have to worry about looking like us when you're out there (Ghana)" (Nelson 113), referring to the racial issues the Black community faces in the United Kingdom, highlighting how the colour of one's skin can put them in danger. Leon's view conveys a sense of acceptance and safety he feels in Ghana in comparison with the challenges the Black community may encounter in the United Kingdom.

He carries on by sharing his experience of living in the United Kingdom – "Came here, had my children, my children having children. And still, it doesn't feel like home. Doesn't feel like I'm wanted here" (Nelson 113). This demonstrates that despite spending a substantial part of his life in the country, Leon still does not feel welcomed or accepted by the majority population. This is due to the experience of being excluded, marginalised or discriminated against. Furthermore, his feelings hint at the cultural clash as well as the emotional disconnect from the dominant culture and community.

What is apparent from this extract is that even when people live in a country, speak the language, and have a family there, it does not guarantee a sense of belonging. Consequently, this can lead to feelings of disappointment and frustration, as people do everything in their power to integrate into the country and local culture; yet it is still not enough. The narration sharply contrasts the life of the protagonist within his community, where he feels "safe" and "free" (Nelson 112) with the hostile and unwelcoming outside world. Nelson portrays the warmth of the communal life, depicting the barbershop, a place where Black people gather

(Nelson 112) as an environment where Black individuals “can lean across the next man”, where they “can laugh” and where they “can breathe” (Nelson 112).

7.2.2 Racial Microaggressions in *Open Water*

Racial microaggressions represent another widespread expression of covert racism. The issue with racial microaggressions is the fact that their nature is subtle to the extent that they may occur in everyday interactions without being detected. It should also be stated that these remarks and behaviour may be even unintentional. Nevertheless, they can still have a negative impact on one’s mental health and sense of belonging. In *Open Water*, the impressionist and lyrical tone of the narrative, characteristic for its subtlety and introspection, is particularly well-suited for depicting the seemingly inconspicuous nature of microaggressions. Therefore, Nelson succeeds in capturing the discreet yet highly pernicious impact of this racist manifestation. In order to explore the possible consequences of this covert form of racism, the following examples will be examined.

Related to the notion of identity, the main character speaks of having experienced “the scrubbing of identity with syllables that have never been your name” (Nelson 103). This statement could be interpreted from various perspectives. The protagonist may be pointing to the misidentification of Black people as Black individuals tend to be mistaken for one another due to the perception that they “all look the same”. Therefore, it is possible that the protagonist has been addressed by another ethnic name, solely due to his appearance, his individuality disregarded in the process.

“The scrubbing of identity with syllables that have never been your name” is also a clear example of Westernisation or, as in this case, anglicisation of ethnic names. It is possible that the protagonist’s name being constantly misspelled and mispronounced led him to simplify or even replace his name in order to avoid discrimination. This process can contribute to an identity crisis due to the loss of cultural identity and heritage.

All in all, no matter the specific interpretation of the quote above, the protagonist’s experience demonstrates the importance of individuality and all the forms through which it is expressed, whether it is one’s name or personality. In addition, this extract sheds light on how damaging it may be to be stripped of the elements that define one’s identity.

The inclination to disregard Black people as unique individuals can also be detected in situations which highlight the tendency to perceive some people as uniform, undifferentiated as if one individual may be easily substituted for another:

He looks like Gabs, doesn't he? What you think, Andre?

Andre gives a non-committal grunt. Gabs, when you meet is an enormous Nigerian boy, holding a quick-witted charm with an easy smile. The comparison is obvious, a little lazy. When faced with this supposed doppelganger, there were questions: Do we look like each other? Are we all meant to be the same? Do you feel this strange feeling too, Gabs, the physicality of fit, something hard and heavy at the top of your chest, like a shot of something clear which won't slip down? And if so, do you have a name for it?

You don't say much to each other, but nod as you depart, understanding what has gone unsaid. (Nelson 25)

The protagonist is compared to a Nigerian boy named Gabs. Considering the protagonist's own observation, the comparison is evidently superficial as the source of their alleged similarity is based solely on the two men being of the same race.

In addition, this proposition of resemblance prompts a series of unsettling rhetorical questions. This may be put down to the fact that the protagonist is once again reduced to a "body" (Nelson 131), an unnamed member defined solely by means of belonging to a racial group. Furthermore, taking into account the matter of racial profiling, mistaken identity may be potentially very dangerous.

What is more, both the protagonist and Gabs share a sense of understanding over their unease around the "lazy" comparison. The term "lazy" in this context criticises the superficiality and simplicity of the comparison and the lack of effort in acquainting with the protagonist prior to making such assumptions.

At first look, all the student did was propose a certain resemblance between the main character and Gabs. Therefore, it may almost seem that no harm was done. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that such a comparison may be used so frequently and mistakenly, that it becomes frustrating.

7.2.3 Racial Stereotypes in *Open Water*

Racial stereotypes are another example of covert racism which is explored in *Open Water* and may be argued to be the source of a number of previously mentioned expressions of racism. As the novel illustrates, racial stereotypes continue to propagate inaccurate generalisations about Black people, influencing how society perceives and treats them. The novel repeatedly portrays the pervasiveness of this manifestation of racism and how it affects the Black community, impinging on their well-being and self-perception. This can be observed in a situation where the main protagonist ponders over the lyrics of the music he is listening to:

Hanif Abdurraqib wrote about this album, wondering how strange a life, to be presented to the world, through your flaws; through blood, swollen face, your bent body. How strange a life you and other black people lead, forever seen and unseen, forever heard and silenced. And how strange a life it is to have to carve out small freedoms, to have to tell yourself that you can breathe. (Nelson 72)

The presented extract illustrates the life of the Black community and how they are viewed through stereotypes and negative traits which tend to be exaggerated. It further highlights the violence, struggle and pain which they are frequently associated with, portraying the widespread assumption of all Black individuals being violent criminals.

What is also addressed is the paradox of Black people being “forever seen and unseen, forever heard and silenced”. This feeling of visibility and invisibility may reflect the fact that Black people are seen or even highlighted in negative contexts, such as in situations where they have violated the law. One should also take into consideration the double standard that arises when a White person commits a heinous crime, they are regarded as a sick individual. However, if a Black person is guilty of the same crime, it is associated with the entire Black community, which is somewhat held responsible. Therefore, in these types of situations, the involvement of Black individuals is emphasised for everyone to see. On the other hand, in terms of justice and equality, their existence is not acknowledged. What

is more, their attempts to shed light on the inequality are not heard as if their voices did not matter⁹.

In addition, the passage refers to the persistent fight for equal rights and fair treatment. Nonetheless, the journey towards equality has been challenging, prompting the Black community to cherish the hard-earned moments when they do feel safe and accepted. Furthermore, such moments are so limited and rare that sometimes Black individuals need to be reminded that they are safe, that they can breathe. This situation may describe the psychological and emotional trauma of living in fear and under constant threat that can lead to forgetting that one can breathe freely. In addition, it may serve as an allusion to the “Black Lives Matter” movement and its slogan “I can’t breathe”, aimed at police brutality.

This passage captures how the lives of Black individuals is constrained by prejudice and racism. It emphasises that not everyone can exist openly without being judged or portrayed as someone they are not. It also conveys the need to recognise the true nature of Black people and to acknowledge the challenges they face. Moreover, the author asserts that the Black community has to fight for what should be basic human rights. Nevertheless, when this freedom is reached, being alive can be joyful as one can just be, without hiding (Nelson 73).

By employing the second person narration, Nelson creates an intimate setting, inviting readers to connect with the protagonist, evoking a sense of closeness. Furthermore, this narrative style enables readers to feel and understand the challenges the protagonist and the entire Black community face. Through subtle references to contemporary pop culture and political situation, Nelson highlights how Black individuals have to remind themselves to perform basic essential functions, such as breathing, since they were deprived of them. This may also prompt readers to consider what other fundamental aspects of life the Black community has been denied.

What should also be addressed, is the effect of racial stereotypes on a person’s self-image. Being exposed and constantly associated with stereotypes can undoubtedly influence how

⁹ For instance, consider the “Black Lives Matter” movement. The purpose of the movement’s marches was to demand justice and fair treatment for Black people. However, the media attention was often on the riots and looting, disregarding the larger issue (Capatides).

Black people perceive themselves. In fact, after some time, they may accept and believe that perhaps what they are portrayed as is true, internalising the stereotypes:

Let's home in for a moment, on the boy, who you glimpsed sitting on the wall, cuffed, surrounded by police officers. With his beautiful, dreaded hair framing his face like open curtains, and how he wanted to be seen and heard, and what led him to outlet his anger into another? That anger which is the result of things unspoken from now and then, of unresolved grief, large and small, of others assuming that he, beautiful Black person in gorgeous Black body, was born violent and dangerous; this assumption, impossible to hide, manifesting in every word and glance and action, and every word and glance and action ingested and internalised. (Nelson 76)

The protagonist observes a Black boy being arrested for assault. The boy is described to be beautiful; yet no one seems to see his beauty as it is overshadowed by the violence and danger which is often assumed to be the inherent nature of Black men. The boy in this situation did commit a crime and it would be certainly easy to immediately condemn the violent attack. However, one may wonder whether the violence was a reaction to the given situation or whether it was a reflection of something much deeper. Therefore, the cause of such anger should be taken into consideration.

As Nelson points out – what is a life when a person cannot express who they truly are, when people already assume that they know you, and this imposed version of you shapes your life and relationships, and you have no other option than to accept it? Asking this may provide an insight into the mind of the young Black boy. By doing so, one may understand that perhaps violence is a manifestation of pain and grief of the person one could have been. Furthermore, as the quote demonstrate it – when people are filled with suppressed emotions and they are unable to heal, there is just so much they can endure before it becomes unbearable. With that being said, the Black boy's pain does not serve as an excuse for his violent behaviour. Nevertheless, it points to a larger issue which sheds light on the impact of societal stereotypes when they eventually become internalised.

By observing this situation and contemplating about the life of the Black young man, the main protagonist may be expressing his own personal feelings as he seems to relate to him.

Furthermore, by identifying with the young boy, the protagonist may confront the challenges affecting his life.

Through this passage, the author comments on the profound impact of not being seen for who you are, of not being able to separate yourself from societal expectations. It also emphasises the complex layers of violence and how important it is to identify the root causes of such a behaviour in order to break the pattern. In addition, it raises questions about how many identities and personalities are overlooked and how many voices are silenced due to this accepted portrayal of Black people, which seems to be inescapable.

7.2.4 Racial Profiling and Police Brutality in *Open Water*

Perhaps the most prominent racial issue covered in *Open Water* is racial profiling and police brutality. The main character is a Black man and as a Black man he is made to navigate his life while being stereotypically associated with criminality and violence, and consequently, having to endure racial profiling. What is more, being forced to live in an environment where he could become the victim of police brutality, simply for being Black profoundly impacts his well-being. It should also be pointed out that the theme of mental health is depicted in a painfully realistic way. The main character suffers from severe psychological and emotional distress that he is unable to voice. Thus, he is left alone with his pain and anxiety, highlighting how isolating mental health issues can be. This intense feeling of frustration and trauma is evident as the main protagonist is subjected to police interrogation:

They tell you there has been a spate of robberies in the area. They say many residents describe a man fitting your description. They ask where you are going and where you have come from. They say you appeared out of nowhere. Like magic, almost. They don't hear your protests. They don't hear your voice. They don't hear you. They don't see you. They see someone, but that person is not you. They would like to see what is in your bag. Your possessions are scattered across the ground in front of you. They say they are just doing their jobs. (Nelson 58)

This extract narrates how a seemingly peaceful walk to a friend's house can suddenly turn into a nightmare. The main protagonist is unexpectedly approached and questioned by the police as he seems to match the description of a perpetrator responsible for having committed several robberies in the area. It could be argued that the law enforcement's reasons for

stopping him was not any factual evidence, it was rather his appearance, which is the essence of racial profiling. This highlights how inescapable racial stereotypes can be and how they can place Black people in dangerous situations.

Furthermore, when the protagonist attempts to provide an explanation, he is not heard, his reasons are not acknowledged. As if the police have already decided that he is guilty and, thus, his protests do not matter, he becomes invisible for them. His character does not matter, only his physical appearance does as if he is just a body, an object. They proceed to demand to see the content of his bag, invading his privacy and causing him to feel even more humiliated.

As a justification, the authorities claim that “they are just doing their jobs”. This phrase demonstrates how easy it is to legitimise and rationalise the invasive and unjust treatment of the Black community. What is more, this simple phrase may reinforce the feeling of helplessness, as it indicates that the authorities have the power to do what they wish, even if it is not supported by legitimate evidence. The protagonist clearly feels hurt and hopeless; however, he decides to remain silent – “You tell no one about that incident, like you told no one about the time they stopped you, hard” (Nelson 59).

The passage conveys the emotional and psychological impact of being the target of racial profiling. It powerfully highlights how invisible and dehumanised the main character feels as he is being unjustly treated like a criminal. The passage also evokes a feeling of hopelessness as the vision of changing the discriminatory system seems unattainable. What is more, the protagonist’s decision to not share his experience may indicate a sense of shame or the inability to seek help due to the stigma surrounding mental health, especially among men. Additionally, as these situations are so common, the protagonist may feel that sharing it would be pointless. As Nelson uses the second person narration, the author compels readers to feel the threat and urgency of the situation, creating a sense of closeness and understanding between the protagonist and the readers.

To make matters worse, this was not an isolated incident:

Second time this week. Don’t you get tired?

Drowned by the screech-squeal-scream of get out of the car get out of the car get out of the car. They ordered you to go to the ground for symbolic purposes. Playing dead. You let out a skinny whimper sharp as a butter knife. You hear the sound rattle in your chest, pressuring shut unserious features. Total eclipse. When you came out, you were beside yourself. This is what it means to die, you thought. Total eclipse. The sky turned black. Ha. You looked in one of their eyes and saw the image of the Devil. He had an index finger gripping the trigger, like he was holding onto a lifeline. He looked scared because instead of question himself, of interrogating his beliefs, of not filling in the gaps, he continues to look at you as a danger. You fit the description. You don't fit in the box but he has squeezed you in. He looked scared. They all did. You wouldn't accept their apologies, nor their extended hands, because even these are weapons in the darkness. Easy mistake to make. (Nelson 59)

The main protagonist describes another stop-and-search within the same week. This extract immediately evokes a frightening atmosphere as the protagonist and his friend are urged to "get out of the car". The order is repeated multiple times, reinforcing the feeling of urgency and threat. What is therefore evident from the extract is the vulnerability of the two Black men, as they lie powerlessly on the ground, being treated like criminals. With the rising fear and anxiety, he views the moment as comparable to death. In fact, this might have been a near death experience as the police officer is holding the deadly weapon, having the power to pull the trigger at any moment.

What is more, the police officer is regarded as the Devil whose mind is clouded by personal prejudice. Some may object that perhaps the officer was truly "just doing his job". However, if that was the case why would there be so much fear, why would there be so much distrust in the person whose occupation is to protect you. Surely, this panic and terror around the law enforcement is not based on nothing. Moreover, even when they are released and provided with apologies, the damage has been done. After being unfairly treated like suspects, how can one have faith in authorities? After enduring another traumatic event, the main protagonist is unable to believe their sincerity. In addition, their clarity of judgement is also questionable due to the multiple occurrences where a Black man was believed to be reaching for his weapon, prompting the counterreaction of the authorities.

The author depicts how exhausting it is to be subjected to yet another live-threatening situation. He illustrates the emotional toll of racial profiling and how through being unfairly targeted, one may lose faith in the law enforcement. Moreover, as opposed to the previous extract, here, the protagonist expresses the need “to tell someone, even if it is yourself” (Nelson 59), suggesting taking the initial step in the attempt to cope with the trauma. Through this, the author might imply how unmanageable trauma can become.

Aside from personally experiencing racial profiling, the main protagonist also witnesses other Black individuals being racially profiled or becoming the victims of police brutality. What should be highlighted is that this sort of exposure to police brutality adds to psychological distress:

Policemen give each other a warning, like in this video, whereby seeing an object in a young Black man’s hand, one of a pair screams to the other, ‘Gun, gun, gun!’ before they unload, twenty shots in all, four connecting with a body that is no longer his own, perhaps never was, after all, it’s not a sudden loss of rights that enables a pair of men to destroy another’s body on suspicion, no it’s not sudden; the perception of a young Black male existed long before this moment, before he fit the description, before two policemen and a helicopter deemed him to be the person smashing the windows of cars, despite not having proof, despite only being told ‘someone’ in the area was smashing the windows of cars, no, it’s not sudden, this moment has been building for years. (Nelson 77)

The way the protagonist describes the murder of a young Black man he just saw in a video reflects how traumatising watching violent acts can be. Involving people from the same racial community as the protagonist enhances his identification with the young man, imagining himself in the same position.

The quoted passage reflects the deeply ingrained prejudice within the law enforcement which led to the false assumption about the young man, triggering them to fire their weapons. This means that there was no need for concrete evidence as solely the assumption of a supposed threat was sufficient to warrant the excessive force. What is even more tragic is

the fact that this fatal incident is not an isolated one, it is rather a result of ongoing systemic racism and injustice¹⁰.

The protagonist suggests that the young man was dehumanised, he was seen simply as a potential suspect who “fit the description”. That was all that was required for the lethal response by the authorities. Not suspicion, not evidence, solely his appearance since all Black men are allegedly dangerous criminals. Therefore, this passage clearly ascribes this treatment of Black people to the deep-rooted racism, discrimination and stereotypes which deemed the young Black man guilty¹¹. The narrative portrays the perpetual danger in which the Black community lives, emphasising that the feelings of fear and unease reflect the years of oppression and violence.

What could have been observed from the previous examples, is the emotional toll stemming from the experience or simply the exposure to racial profiling and police brutality. The psychological impact of these expressions of racism is noticeable from the main protagonist’s stream of thoughts:

That walking home worried you sometimes, because you didn’t know which fate would meet you, the one who looked like you or the one who couldn’t see you as you were meant to be seen, or whether you would arrive home without incident, and live to fear another day. (Nelson 76)

The presented passage illustrates the emotional and psychological toll of being unfairly treated by the law enforcement due to negative stereotypes, which results in the inability to feel safe in public spaces.

The simple act of walking the streets is presented to be filled with anxiety as the main protagonist does not know whether danger is to come. What is more, even if he survives, he will “live to fear another day”, meaning that he will still not be truly free, implying an endless cycle. It also raises questions about how a person can enjoy life if they are constantly in a survival mode, highlighting how stifling racism can be.

¹⁰ See chapters 1.3.3 Systemic Racism, 2.2.6 Racial Profiling, 2.2.7 Police Brutality

¹¹ See chapters 1.3.3 Systemic Racism, 2.2.6 Racial Profiling, 2.2.7 Police Brutality

The author portrays the everyday existence of Black people, emphasising the need to stay vigilant at all times and the unease which the main character often feels. Moreover, the passage expresses that even mundane activities could potentially escalate into life-threatening situations.

The main protagonist further addresses that the trauma and pain does not cease when a Black man dies as it extends to all those close to him. In addition, even if the man survives, he might end up leading a broken, empty life:

Imagine leaving your house and not knowing if you will return intact. This is how you die. This is how young boys die. This is how your mothers and partners and sisters and daughters die too. The grief makes them tired. The effort makes them tired. This living is precarious and could make light work of your life at any moment. Imagine knowing that your wholeness could be split at any moment, so you live in pieces. You live broken, you live small, lest someone make you smaller, lest someone breaks you. You are Black body, container, vessel, property. You are treated as such because property is easy to destroy and plunder. (Nelson 136)

The passage addresses the possible dangers hidden in everyday life which a Black person could encounter due to their race. It seems almost unimaginable how terrifying and frustrating it must be to leave one's house, not knowing if they will live to experience another day. What the protagonist starts to perceive more and more urgently as his relationship grows deeper is the impact of one's possible death on those close to them. At the same time, he stresses the emotional toll this type of tragedy might have on the community – losing a loved one means losing a part of yourself, emphasising the far-reaching impact of racism.

In addition, the narration reflects the feeling of exhaustion. Particularly, the weariness of grieving and having to be constantly alert. What is more, the protagonist expresses that even when he manages to live to another day, the emotional burden and trauma prompts him to live a constrained life, unable to live freely, to express himself – his fear prevents him from the joy of being alive or being in love. Thus, *Open Water* repeatedly illustrates that the protagonist and the community are still dehumanised and objectified by some – they are reduced to expendable objects, to soulless bodies. This emotion is further heightened by the

absence of characters, which would defy this approach and thus triggers a great deal of anxiety and hopelessness both in the protagonist as well as the readers.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how racism is portrayed in contemporary British fiction, namely, *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams and *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. While racism can be divided into a number of categories, the present thesis focused on the distinction between overt and covert racism and their manifestations in the two literary works. The main focus was placed on these two types of racism with the motivation to accentuate that racism often occurs without being discerned, in fact, it may not even be recognised as racism. Nevertheless, the impact of covert racism is still undeniably detrimental, thus, it should be regarded with due seriousness. Through the analysis of the two novels, the thesis aimed to provide a mirror to the modern-day British society, highlighting the ongoing racial issues hidden in everyday social interactions and institutional practices.

The theoretical part relies predominantly on contemporary research and publications to provide the terminology and the core aspects for the analysis carried out in the practical part. The theoretical section reveals that racism extends beyond interpersonal interactions, it reaches individual institutions which engage with each other, contributing to greater systemic oppression. The issue is that racist policies within institutions, and consequently within systems, are so deeply ingrained that they are rarely identified as discriminatory. It should also be underscored that this thesis presents race as a social construct lacking solid scientific evidence. Nevertheless, the concept of race still has significant implications for the lives of minorities, therefore, it cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, the theoretical background sheds light on the differences between overt and covert expressions of racism, highlighting that both explicit and insidious forms of racism can be as equally damaging. Lastly, this section offers an insight into racial discrimination in the United Kingdom since 2010s, indicating the rise of racial issues associated with Brexit and pointing to the influences of the country's colonial past and the period of mass immigration.

The practical part comprises of the analyses of two distinct literary works, *Queenie* and *Open Water*. The interpretation of the novels focuses on the overt and covert expressions of racism while also showcasing the different approaches the authors employed to depict and confront racism in their respective works. Nonetheless, despite the different treatments of racism,

both novels demonstrate how pervasive racism is and how profoundly it impacts the lives and identities of the protagonists.

Queenie by Candice Carty-Williams follows the life and struggles of Queenie Jenkins, a young Black woman. As part of a racial minority, Queenie is forced to endure and witness racial injustices, such as daily microaggressions or unethical treatment of the Black community by law enforcement. Moreover, as a woman of colour, Queenie's identity is shaped by the societal stereotypes that she is aggressive, loud, sassy, confrontational. As a result, Queenie is defined by this inaccurate portrayal which overshadows her true qualities – the fact that she is funny, smart and ambitious but also highly sensitive and vulnerable as she navigates the aftermath of a breakup. In the character of Queenie, Carty-Williams challenges the constraining stereotypical depiction of Black women as “strong”. Being strong is by all means a positive quality. However, expecting Black women to be strong all the time may lead to a certain neglect of their mental health and emotional needs as it places a great deal of strain and demands on them and to some extent sets unrealistic expectations. Consequently, these assumptions contribute to Queenie's mental health difficulties as she feels pressured not to show any sign of weakness as her vulnerability is weaponised against her.

Queenie's story reveals her struggles with her well-being as she is forced to confront the challenges of being a Black woman in a predominantly White environment. Apart from racial stereotypes, what also highly impinges on Queenie's mental health is how men treat her. Firstly, Queenie was in a relationship with Tom, a White man. During that relationship, Queenie experiences racist comments and a great deal of ignorance and insensitivity from both Tom and his family, leaving a lasting impact. After their breakup, Queenie is continuously subjected to sexualisation and fetishisation during her interactions with men as they view her as a sexual object rather than a sensitive human being, diminishing her self-worth.

The novel realistically portrays the racial issues permeating every level of society, impacting the main protagonist's life. What deserves attention is the author's treatment of racism. In the novel, Candice Carty-Williams frequently employs humour, irony, satire and absurdity to address the severity of this widespread issue. By doing so, the author presents the instances

of racism in an absurd light, emphasising the irrationality and unfairness of racism. Moreover, in *Queenie*, satire serves as a powerful tool for criticism of the unjust yet acceptable societal behaviour and norms, prompting readers to contemplate about their own views. One could argue that the choice of this approach renders the issue of racism more approachable. To elaborate, racism is often perceived as a serious and heavy topic which some people tend to avoid since it causes a sense of unease. Therefore, demonstrating racist situations wittily, satirising the racist beliefs helps to make the topic more digestible and more importantly it helps to remove the label of a taboo topic. What should also be highlighted is that Carty-Williams emphasises the importance of female friendships and family as *Queenie*'s support systems during her healing journey.

As for *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson, the novel captures the story of a young Black man, who remains nameless throughout the work. As a Black man, the main protagonist faces obstacles created by the stereotypical association of Black men with violence and criminality. Due to this image, the protagonist is exposed to racial profiling, leading him to be repeatedly treated as a criminal suspect. Consequently, the protagonist feels as if he was just a body, trapped in an inescapable cycle of discrimination. In addition, having experienced a series of traumatic events profoundly impinges on the protagonist's mental health which resonates throughout the entire novel. To exacerbate the situation, the character is unable to express his pain and struggles, creating a barrier between him and his girlfriend. Therefore, he is forced to cope with his trauma all by himself. Similarly to *Queenie*, the novel also deals with a love story. However, *Open Water* takes a different direction, yet both outcomes are traumatic. All things considered, despite the strong sense of despair, the main protagonist finds solace in music and within his own community where, for once, he feels free.

Considering Nelson's writing process, he manages to portray racism and its impact in a heart-wrenching way. Nelson's approach is more lyrical and poignant as he moves beyond the surface, focusing on the psychological level of racism, highlighting the ingrained fear, frustration, anger and sadness. His prose often resembles poetry – it is highly imaginative and impressionist. Furthermore, it employs repetitions, creating a distinctive rhythm. What is also striking is the reference to various artistic expressions, such as photography, film or

music – through pop music, Hip Hop and R'n'B, Nelson illustrates or develops the emotional states of the protagonist and indicates how healing music can be. As the author vividly depicts the protagonist's inner life, the novel has the ability evoke empathy and emotional responses from readers. Moreover, by demonstrating the painful reality that is the existence of the Black community, Nelson humanises their experience. As a result, this aspect may promote a deeper connection to the character, enabling readers to relate or at least attempt to understand the protagonist's struggles and emotions. What also enhances the connection between the protagonist and readers is the sense of urgency and emotional intimacy achieved by the unique narrative perspective, such as the second person narration. Consequently, readers feel as if they were a part of the story.

Regarding the two literary works, both capture the complexities of Black lives in contemporary United Kingdom influenced by racism and its impact on the protagonists and other members of the multi-ethnic community. The identities of the two characters are negatively perceived through various stereotypes, Queenie being viewed as an angry Black woman, the male protagonist as a violent Black man. By addressing the matter of racial stereotypes, Carty-Williams and Nelson highlight how limiting they can be as they misleadingly portray the Black community to be one-dimensional, dismissing their complexity and diversity which further impacts their self-perception. Another issue is that stereotypes create a certain division in society which contributes to racial minorities being regarded as "others". Furthermore, due to racism, both characters are subjected to a great deal of emotional and psychological distress. The two authors, therefore, demonstrate how detrimental experiencing and witnessing racial injustice can be. In addition, incorporating the notion of mental health in *Queenie* and *Open Water* showcase that Black people do not have to always be strong, in fact, it is impossible to be resilient in every situation, especially after having endured so much pain and trauma. On the contrary, the novels emphasise the importance of being vulnerable and the necessity of seeking help, whether it is in a friend, family, community, partner or a professional.

In terms of distinctions, the most noticeable aspect is the tone of the two works. As mentioned before, Carty-Williams demonstrates how humour and satire may serve as a powerful tool for depicting and criticising racist behaviour and attitudes. While Nelson's

approach is more emotional and moving, prompting readers to empathise with the main protagonist, feeling his pain and frustration. What is also evident is that *Queenie* depicts the struggles of Black women while *Open Water* explores the challenges Black men face, demonstrating the role of gender in racism. The relationship between these two notions highlight that Black women are more prone to be sexualised while Black men are more likely to face racial profiling and police brutality, again due to racial stereotypes. Both authors also explore the impact of racism on romantic relationships. Carty-Williams sheds light on the problems which may arise in interracial relationships when there is a lack of racial sensitivity. Furthermore, she reflects the struggles of Black women as they are frequently oversexualised and objectified. Nelson, on the other hand, illustrates how racial trauma can hinder a person from fully emerging in a relationship, struggling to form meaningful connections. It should also be pointed out that Carty-Williams illustrates the significance of female friendships and having people to rely on whereas Nelson portrays his character as someone who is unable to share his burden even with those closest to him, highlighting how lonely and isolating pain can be.

Nonetheless, despite some differences between the two novels, both works present a realistic demonstration of racism in contemporary British society as they resonate the authors' real-life experiences. Furthermore, both novels present various manifestations of overt and covert racism, elucidating their complex nature. Lastly, Carty-Williams and Nelson depict their characters in a way that makes it easy to connect with them and feel for them which leads to a deeper understanding for racial issues and their long-lasting impact.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that literature and, in this case, fiction has the power to reveal, address and condemn the pervasiveness of racism. Through literature, one may also discover the societal tendency to trivialise and normalise racist practices, disregarding their harmful impact. Moreover, for people who have faced discrimination or racial injustice, being able to relate to characters who are also victims of racism can be empowering and healing as it evokes a sense of solidarity which validates their own experience and feelings. For those who have not been directly exposed to racism, reading about racism might provide a deeper understanding and empathy for those affected by it. Furthermore, literature may subvert the stereotypical representation of racial minorities as well as the often-insensitive

behaviour and attitudes. It also gives a platform to those who have been previously neglected, questioning the established perceptions of racial minorities. Lastly, literature may prompt conversations about racism and the need for societal changes in order to tackle this significant issue.

Contemporary society undoubtedly seeks to promote and embrace diversity; nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that racism still continues to affect the lives of racial and ethnic minorities. What should be noted is that while this thesis demonstrates that race is a social construct, rather than a scientific one, the concept of race still influences how people are perceived and treated. In addition, one's race governs the opportunities they are provided as racism does not concern only individuals but also systems of institutions that perpetuate inequality. Therefore, unfortunately, the notion of race cannot be disregarded. Furthermore, in order to conquer this deep-seated issue, it is vital not only to pursue proper education on this matter, but also to raise awareness of everyday racist occurrences, both interpersonal and institutional. For the purpose of creating a more inclusive and open-minded society, one should reflect on their own biases and privileges. What is more, one should be able to listen and consider situations from different perspectives, without dismissing other people's feelings and opinions. Finally, it is fundamental to engage in open and honest discussions with others about their experiences and views in order to grasp the impact of racism, even if it might not always be comfortable.

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