

# **‘The Pretty and the Political Didn’t Seem to Blend Well’: Anita Heiss’s Chick Lit and the Destabilisation of a Genre**

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Since the runaway success of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996 (and arguably before then),<sup>1</sup> chick lit has become a ubiquitous—if not always celebrated—feature of the contemporary literary, social and cultural landscape. Some typecast the genre as a series of clichés, castigating readers and authors alike for their embrace of pastel-pink covers, cursive font and plots designed to ‘lull you into a hypnotic state with their simple life lessons’ (Dowd, ‘Heels over Hemmingway’; see also Dowd, ‘Liberties’; ‘Bainbridge Denounces Chick-Lit’). These assessments ignore not only the diversity of the chick lit genre, but the many different types of political engagement at work within it. A growing body of academic and mainstream criticism (Butler and Desai; Chen; Donadio; Ommundsen; Sellei) documents the increasingly global appeal of chick lit. Collectively, these theorists argue that the chick lit genre affords non-Western authors (those authors who occupy ‘positions within, but marginal to, the global cosmopolis’ (Ommundsen, ‘Sex and the Global City’ 110)) a means of appropriating—and undercutting—Western narratives of romance in late capitalist consumer culture.

In Australia, Anita Heiss is one of the genre’s preeminent and prolific practitioners. Since 2007, she has written five chick lit novels, the most recent, *Tiddas*, published in March 2014. A Wiradjuri woman from Central NSW, Heiss is a veritable one-woman industry, writing poetry, memoir, academic monographs and young adult fiction. She maintains an ever-expanding social media presence and speaks regularly at local, national and international literary events. Moreover, she is unique in her position as an Aboriginal Australian author writing commercial women’s fiction for a mainstream, middleclass audience. Heiss is fond of quipping that her decision to write chick lit was prompted as much by the need to ‘purg[e] [her]self of 15 years of bad dates as it was about writing urban Aboriginal women into mainstream Australian fiction’ (Heiss, ‘Why Chick Lit?’; see also Heiss ‘From “Chick Lit” to “Choc Lit”’; Meyer). Cleansing properties aside, the chick lit genre easily lends itself to the depiction of young, urban Aboriginal women living lives as glamorous as Carrie Bradshaw, and as humorous as Bridget Jones.

By foregrounding a non-Western, non-white subjectivity, Heiss joins a growing number of authors worldwide who appropriate the genre for their own use (Ommundsen ‘Sex and the Global City’ 110). In these reworkings, the protagonist is still young, female, and wedded to her consumer lifestyle, but she is no longer white (Ommundsen; Chen; Butler and Desai; Sellei). She is just as likely to be South Asian (as in Kavita Daswani’s chick lit), Latina (Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez’s chick lit), Chinese (Annie Wang), Saudi Arabian (Rajaa Alsanea), Eastern European (Zsuzsanna Rác), African-American (Sister Souljah), or, as Heiss demonstrates, Aboriginal Australian. The ease with which the chick lit formula can be modified to accommodate non-Western subjectivities suggests a plasticity that transcends, or at the very least, counterbalances, both the genre’s inherent conservatism and the conventions that govern its narrative and structure. In its traditional articulations, the chick lit genre is heteronormative, white, and middleclass; traditional gender binaries are taken seriously and living the big city, consumer culture dream shapes the narrative arc.

Wenche Ommundsen, one of the only critics to discuss Heiss's work in an academic context, draws attention to the cracks, discrepancies and stresses that are produced when non-Western authors write themselves into the global flows and discourses of chick lit. 'Going global,' Ommundsen notes, 'chick lit not only becomes more heterogeneous in terms of its social and cultural coordinates; it also strains at the limits of the genre' ('Sex and the Global City' 110). This paper, in turn, builds on Ommundsen's work, delving deeper into the question of how chick lit 'strain[s] at the limits of the genre.' While it is certainly possible (not to mention necessary) to challenge and subvert chick lit's reliance on a hegemonic white subjectivity, this is not as simple as turning one switch on while leaving all the others off; activate one, and the rest are affected too. Accordingly, in this paper I argue that changing one aspect of the chick lit genre, such as the race of the heroine, destabilises the genre as a whole. In making this argument, I aim to give a fuller account of Heiss's popular fiction: despite her mainstream success (or perhaps because of it), Heiss is yet to receive sustained scholarly attention.

The first section of this paper approaches Heiss's destabilisation of the genre through a theoretical lens, examining how recent accounts of the chick lit genre attempt to explain the growth of non-Western subjectivities. I then undertake a close reading of two of Heiss's chick lit novels, *Not Meeting Mr Right* and *Manhattan Dreaming*. In *Manhattan Dreaming*, Heiss repurposes Old Parliament House as the National Aboriginal Gallery (NAG). This move boldly inverts established structures of white power, but it comes at a price: other expressions of Aboriginal political will, such as the Tent Embassy, are subsumed by the NAG. Likewise, *Not Meeting Mr Right*'s apparent celebration of strong, independent Aboriginal women is underwritten by a surprisingly traditional subtext, particularly in its treatment of gender and sexuality. In both examples, Heiss's attentiveness to racial politics brings other, more conservative aspects of the chick lit genre into sharp relief. Additionally, by attending to racial politics, Heiss has no choice but to enter into an explicitly politicised space that white chick lit can blithely skip over and ignore.

Even Heiss's mischievous sense of humour, alternatively ironic, playful and witty, is affected by her destabilisation of the genre. Humour is as much a part of chick lit as its high-spirited heroines and bustling consumer lifestyle. As Stephanie Harzewski confirms, 'chick lit deliberately aims for a humorous effect . . . the protagonists' self-deprecating humor, readers claim, lends the novels an identifiable, friendly voice and approachable comfort level' (38). Yet this must be viewed as a particular kind of humour: *white* chick lit humour. While Heiss's novels may appear to possess a similar comedic energy to that identified by Harzewski, her use of humour is in fact highly selective. If there are some subjects that Heiss treats humorously, others are strictly off-limits. This division is drawn along racial lines: when Heiss's Aboriginal characters are speaking, they make cheeky jokes about themselves (as blackfellas) or others (as whitefellas). This corresponds with Angelina Hurley's observation that 'indigenous peoples worldwide note humour existing as a resistance to oppression, an expression of identity, a means of survival and a tool for healing.' It also suggests a certain sensitivity: the whitefellas who populate Heiss's fictional universe could not make the same jokes about blackfellas. There is good reason for this—despite the work of Heiss and many others, Indigenous Australians are still subject to ongoing racism, oppression and colonisation in Australian society. Consequently, laughter *at* Indigenous Australians retains its ability to hurt, humiliate and offend. How then does Heiss adhere to the generic requirements for humour whilst simultaneously protecting her Aboriginal subjects from becoming an object of humour themselves? While Ommundsen suggests that 'the political messages of [Heiss's fiction] have been tailored to suit the overall tone of cheerful banter' (Ommundsen, 'Sex and the Global City' 119) I come to a different conclusion. As I will explain over the course of this paper, Heiss balances these competing impulses by displacing humour onto other subjects that are ordinarily subject to social taboo, such as homophobia.

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Despite the evident diversity of the chick lit genre in the mainstream literary marketplace, and despite the slowly expanding body of critical work that documents its significance, the dominant theoretical mode of chick lit criticism, post-feminism, characterises the genre in overwhelmingly negative terms. If post-feminism describes the gradual erosion of 'feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s' (McRobbie 255), chick lit (along with its cinematic counterparts, the rom com and the chick flick) is held up as emblematic of this decline. The young, single women who populate the post-feminist universe are dismissed as the ungrateful and undeserving heritors of feminism; not only, so the complaint goes, do they take the hard-won 'gains' of feminism for granted (for example, the right to sexual, economic, political, social independence) but they explicitly reject these gains in favour of old fashioned, 'pre-feminist' sexual and gender roles.

As Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai point out, post-feminism is itself a highly problematic and contentious term, reproducing the idea that chick lit is both a 'homogenously white normative genre' and politically neutral (2). As they see it, the proliferation of chick lit subgenres that foreground non-Western subjectivities and epistemologies do a far better job of critiquing the 'neoliberalism, heteronormativity, and racism' (2) at play within Western chick lit than many critiques emanating from the academy and mainstream media. Accordingly, to claim that Heiss's chick lit is political solely because it features Aboriginal female protagonists is to make an implicit assumption that chick lit featuring white female protagonists is apolitical. Butler and Desai draw attention to, and undo, such assumptions, arguing that all chick lit needs to be read as political, especially—and most urgently—if the protagonist is a white, middle-class, neo-liberal woman. It is nonetheless true that Heiss's divergence from the chick lit norm is what makes her fiction more obviously political and therefore remarkable, even if in an ideal world this should not be the case.

As Butler and Desai show, consideration of the chick lit heroine's racial identity (whether white or non-white) is more than enough to politicise the genre. Heiss's fiction certainly enacts the call of critical whiteness studies to 'make [whiteness] visible' (Moreton-Robinson 87). However, Heiss goes further: in addition to emphasising an Aboriginal Australian female subjectivity, she infuses her narrative with a keen—and explicit—political consciousness. Her novels canvas issues ranging from the topical (Keith Windschuttle and the history wars; the 2004 Palm Island death in custody) to the technical (copyright issues for academics and writers working with Aboriginal communities; capitalisation of the 'a' in Aboriginal) (see also Ommundsen 'Sex and the Global City' 117). This is fraught terrain, and Heiss's readiness to pull the genre into unfamiliar territory testifies to her willingness to take on various narrative, structural and ideological challenges that most chick lit authors would be happy to leave unquestioned.

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*Not Meeting Mr Right*, Heiss's first chick lit novel, follows two years in the life of 28-year-old Alice Aigner, a young, urban, Aboriginal woman. She's got the job ('the head of the history department at a private Catholic girls school' (2)), the friends (a close-knit group of three other women), the lifestyle (alcohol-fuelled nights out with the girls, facials, sunbaking and shopping) and the happy confidence of a sun-kissed Sydney-sider; everything it, seems, apart from a man. After enduring a traumatising high school reunion where everyone is happily married except for her, she realises she needs a man, and quick. A series of

unsuccessful dates leaves Alice increasingly dispirited; when she has all but given up, she realises that Mr Right was there from the very beginning, in the form of her friendly neighbourhood garbage collector, Gary (affectionately nicknamed Gary-the-Garbo).

This quick sketch of *Not Meeting Mr Right* is enough to highlight just how fundamental female Aboriginal subjectivity is to Heiss's political agenda. Alice and her friends are strong, sexy and educated women. They confidently and humorously assert their Aboriginal identity, revealing a finely-nuanced political awareness. Alice describes herself as a 'Bourgeois Black,' explaining that 'it wasn't hard to be in the Aboriginal community—you just had to have a job and own your own car and you were regarded as middleclass' (237). If Alice and her friends were white, it would be fairly unremarkable for them to enjoy the benefits of a well-paid job and disposable income. Yet the fact that they, as Aboriginal women, partake in white, middle class rituals is a pointed political statement: while it may be easy to condemn chick lit for its reliance on late capitalist consumer culture, this culture nonetheless works to exclude non-white subjects. Participation becomes an act of subversion and resistance: 'the 'right to consume' may be of significance to women of colour as a way of negotiating racial, class and gender inequities in relation to ethnic and national communities, as well as a way of claiming citizenship' (Butler and Desai 14).

It should be clear, then, that Heiss's female characters represent a radical departure from the traditional chick lit heroine. Not only are they proud Koori women, but they entertain a lively political engagement and are forthright in their assertions of sexual, financial and emotional independence. Moreover, in an Australian context, the deliberate insertion of Aboriginal women into mainstream Australian fiction is significant simply by virtue of the fact that Aboriginal people are systematically ignored and rendered voiceless by the existing power structures within Australia. Nonetheless, Heiss's fiction is surprisingly conservative in many respects, displaying a staunch adherence to gender roles and a squeamish repudiation of homosexuality. Take, for example, the central plot device of *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Alice's search for a man. Of the many possible benefits she associates with being in a relationship (love, companionship, regular sex), the one she prioritises above all else is having a man around the house to fix things for her. As it stands, she relies on her father to do odd jobs:

He often replaced light globes for me, fixed leaking taps, hung pictures and screwed, nailed and hammered things when needed. He was the reason that I hadn't really noticed not having a man around. I was a feminist, but I was also quite comfortable with not having to swing a hammer or turn a screwdriver. I knew what I was good at, and it wasn't home maintenance. (51)

Alice repeatedly describes these as 'boy jobs' (53, 190), believing that 'most men can just fix stuff like that' (276). Alice never goes on to elaborate what 'girl jobs,' the unspoken corollary to 'boy jobs,' might in fact be. Her silence on this matter could be interpreted as tacit acknowledgement that such a re-inscription of gender roles is sexist; to insist on a division of girl and boy jobs would threaten her vision of female agency by placing women back in the realm of the domestic.

Alice's investment in traditional gender roles also explains her reluctance to pay for any of her dates or to drive her dates around. This reluctance surfaces almost every time she goes on a date. It is depressing enough that Charlie, one potential Mr Right, has 'bad dress sense' and 'dreadful skin'; his prospects sink even further when Alice finds out he has no car: 'Oh god, I was going to have play [sic] chauffeur to this fella if we dated. That was not an attractive

option at all. I wanted to play passenger occasionally' (85). Making her way home on the train after another disappointing date, Alice dreads the 'thought of having to play chauffeur and banker for a guy who couldn't drive or manage money' (158). One man is viewed considerably more favourably solely because 'he drove a car' and was unlikely to ask Alice 'for milk money' (109). She practically squeals with delight when she makes the acquaintance of Paul, the hunky engineer with a 'sporty silver Peugeot coupe.' Alice exclaims: 'I loved that I was a passenger for the first time in a long time' (205). Her repeated and emphatic assertion that men must play 'chauffeur and banker' (coupled with her aversion to occupying this role herself) highlights a very specific set of gender expectations that are both rigid and unyielding. Men—not women—pay for the meals, drive the cars, fix the light globes and take out the rubbish.

The conservative rendering of gender in Heiss's fiction is matched by an equally conservative view of sexuality. *Not Meeting Mr Right*, like most chick lit perhaps, is firmly focussed on the highs and lows of heterosexual dating rituals: Do I ask *him* out? Should I sleep with *him* on the first date? Will I ever find *Mr Right*? The strongly heteronormative bias that pervades the storyline of *Not Meeting Mr Right*, is, in itself, nothing unexpected, merely a recognition of the genre conventions of chick lit. What *is* surprising, though, is Alice's extreme paranoia about the possibility that she will be mistaken for a lesbian because she is single. This fear surfaces primarily in conversation with, or in reference to, her mother, who repeatedly cautions Alice: 'people are going to think you're a lesbian if you don't start spending time with men' (57). Exasperated, Alice responds that she is not a lesbian, adding that her 'mantra for the day seemed to be *I'm not a lesbian, I'm not a lesbian*. As much as my mother enjoyed saying the word, I didn't' (57; original emphasis). Alice is 'determined to prove to [her] family that [she is] not a lesbian' (63) but is resigned to the thought that 'others probably thought I was a lesbian' (64); she frets that even her gay male friends 'probably all thought I was a lesbian too,' a realisation that prompts her to get her (straight) act together: 'Shit, I really did need to get some dating happening—not just to meet Mr Right' (64). These passages represent a small sample of the many paranoid and feverish framings of lesbian identity sprinkled throughout *Not Meeting Mr Right*.<sup>2</sup>

To be mistaken for a lesbian clearly mortifies Alice and Heiss plays this to comedic effect. Indeed, by *over-emphasising* Alice's sexual paranoia, Heiss could well be advancing an ironic critique of homophobia. Alice's paranoia is, after all, so laughably over-the-top that it is difficult to take seriously. But when we laugh at Alice's homosexual paranoia, what exactly are we laughing at? Are we laughing because Alice's sexual neuroses are blatantly misplaced, or is there a sharper political edge at work? Does Heiss humorously expose a particular kind of homophobia in order to denounce it? Though the distinction between these two possibilities may appear slight, it nonetheless requires closer examination. I believe that while the text certainly exaggerates Alice's paranoia to comedic effect, this is not to evince an ironic comment on homophobia; rather, I take this as evidence of Heiss's destabilisation of the chick lit genre. Heiss's humour operates at one remove (the text makes clear that Alice is patently heterosexual) but not two (that Alice's homophobia is a matter of concern). More specifically, Heiss's dedication to depicting the lived reality of women like her not only delimits a space sensitive to humour but creates a political hierarchy where humour is displaced onto other subjects. As homosexuality has no bearing on the lives nor sexual identities of Heiss's fictional creations, it suddenly becomes available as a site of humour.

Through a number of narrative and structural techniques, Heiss signals to the reader that Alice is unambiguously heterosexual. As highlighted earlier, the chick lit genre is predicated on

heteronormative forms and rituals. While Heiss alters some of the variables associated with the genre, most notably the racial identity of her heroines, she retains and accentuates its intensely heteronormative outlook. Similarly, the central trope of *Not Meeting Mr Right* is resolutely heterosexual: Alice dates man after man in her search for Mr Right. Finally, the narrative presents Alice as lustily, aggressively and unequivocally heterosexual. Her numerous (though invariably short-lived) relationships with other men are the stuff of legend amongst her friends, and she repeatedly shares her appreciation of men with the reader. Her feverish imagination paints a basketball team made up of ‘Fit men. Tall men. Sydney men. Most likely straight men. Hot, sweaty, sexy men!’ (93). A game of touch footy ignites similar cravings: ‘there was so much eye candy I could feel myself putting on weight just looking at the sweet, sweaty men’ (73). With so much overt heterosexual signalling at so many different levels of the novel, Alice’s fear that she is a lesbian seems grossly unfounded.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the humour stems from dramatic irony but in a limited sense—we know she’s attracted to men and her fear of being mistaken for a lesbian is played for laughs because it is so obviously mistaken.

Heiss’s treatment of homosexuality and feminism is overlaid by an implicit grading system, and they are accorded significantly less value than her primary concern with writing the experience of women like her into the collective Australian imagination. In my reading of Heiss’s fiction, I attribute this disparity to her destabilisation of the chick lit genre: by altering one variable, other features of the genre take on a sharper (and in this case, more conservative and more humorous) cast. Interestingly, there are moments in Heiss’s fiction that gesture towards the importance of a pro-feminist, anti-homophobic politics: her characters react with distaste when their beliefs are expressed by others. Despite her paranoia at being mistaken for a lesbian, Alice sees herself as adhering to an anti-homophobic agenda: when she encounters homophobia in others, she rejects it. At her ten-year high school reunion, Alice is disgusted that one of her former friends would support a political party with a ‘homophobic and sexist’ platform (8). Likewise, when drawing up her list of ‘Essential selection criteria for Mr Right,’ the man of her dreams is ‘non-racist, not-fascist, non-homophobic believer in something . . .’ (37). In similar fashion, Alice’s embrace of traditional gender roles seems at odds with her marked intolerance of the same attitude in others. For instance, she dismisses the pre-wedding ritual of the kitchen tea as ‘sexist’ for making the assumption that the kitchen is an exclusively female space: ‘[W]hy doesn’t the man have a kitchen tea to receive appliances *he* can use in the kitchen? It was such a fifties concept’ (149, original emphasis). Alice’s stringent expectation that others take a socially progressive approach to gender roles and homosexuality (whilst simultaneously perpetuating entirely different beliefs herself) confirms that the text’s feminist consciousness and attentiveness to sexual diversity is ultimately secondary to its racial politics. Or, put another way, there is a degree of flexibility and lenience in Heiss’s treatment of these matters that is simply not optional when it comes to racial politics.

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Heiss’s depiction of Aboriginal female subjectivity is one of the many ways she injects her own political agenda into the chick lit genre. In the second half of this paper, my interest is drawn to a different, yet equally important, articulation of her racial politics. The imaginary (but entirely realistic) National Aboriginal Gallery (NAG) functions as a central motif that orders the narrative in both *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming*. Libby Cutmore (protagonist of *Paris Dreaming*) and Lauren Lucas (protagonist of *Manhattan Dreaming*) are best friends and senior staff at the NAG. In each novel, the central protagonist is sent overseas

to represent the NAG at an equivalent overseas institution: Lauren Lucas wins a visiting fellowship to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) at the Smithsonian in New York, while Libby curates an exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

In the opening pages of *Manhattan Dreaming*, Lauren Lucas talks the reader through the complex negotiations that led to the creation of the National Aboriginal Gallery. The NAG occupies the entire grounds of Old Parliament House and its existence dates back to 2006; while the government of the day ‘would never hand it over for an Aboriginal embassy,’ Lauren explains that the government ‘could be persuaded to hand it over for a national gallery’ (48). This does not necessarily represent a triumph of the aesthetic or the symbolic: instead, money talks. The decision to establish a National Aboriginal Gallery is attributed, firstly to the ‘success of [the Aboriginal] visual arts movement internationally’ and secondly, ‘the revenue [Aboriginal] artists were bringing into the country every year’ (48). Though it has only been in existence for a few years at the time *Manhattan Dreaming* opens, the NAG is presented as a dynamic and energetic organisation, brimming with ideas and enthusiasm: ‘the gallery now had a staff of over sixty, a growing team of curators and a number of exhibitions running concurrently, with an exhibition schedule right into the next decade’ (48).

The NAG is framed in overwhelmingly positive terms, representing long overdue and wholeheartedly welcome institutional recognition of Aboriginal art and culture. By housing the NAG within Old Parliament House, Heiss dislodges monolithic narratives of European possession and dispossession in order to (re)install the continuing (and never ceded) history of Aboriginal possession and connection to country. Opened on 9th May 1927, the strikingly white exterior of what was then the only Parliament House reflected a building designed to serve the interests of Australia’s white settler population. It is true that successive governments occupying Old Parliament House enacted a limited amount of legislation that aimed to ‘help’ Aboriginal people, or ‘advance’ their rights (the 1967 Referendum, for example, or the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976). Nonetheless, these acts occurred against an oppressively racist backdrop. Indeed, the white, racist power structures embedded within and emanating from Old Parliament House could only be made possible by the invasion of sovereign land and the attempted annihilation of its First Peoples. In Heiss’s chick lit, Aboriginal appropriation of this thoroughly white power institution symbolises a potent ‘taking back’ of land, power and dignity.

Unlike European arrival in 1788, the NAG’s move into Old Parliament House did not displace its existing tenants: they had already left in 1988 for new Parliament House. Old Parliament House subsequently reopened as the Museum of Australian Democracy in 2009, but not before it was home to the National Portrait Gallery (where it was housed from 1998 to 2008). That the physical space of Old Parliament House can be adapted to accommodate other national institutions certainly provides a compelling precedent for it to be considered the home of the National Aboriginal Gallery, even if this remains a shadow history in each novel, never explicitly articulated nor referred to. For those readers of Heiss’s fiction who are aware that Old Parliament House currently houses the Museum of Australian Democracy, the NAG’s move into Old Parliament House becomes a pointed comment that there could be no finer acknowledgement of Australia’s democratic system than to inaugurate a national institution dedicated to Aboriginal art.

In Heiss’s history of the NAG, the Tent Embassy is moved inside from its position outside Old Parliament House: ‘as soon as we moved in [Emma, the Gallery’s director] invited the

Tent Embassy mob to take up residence in the old Country Party Rooms, which overlooked the original Tent Embassy site, where only a flagpole and plaque stood now' (48). In the non-fictional history of Australia, the Tent Embassy was established on January 27 1972 by four Aboriginal activists (Michael Anderson, Billie Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Coorie), erecting a beach umbrella on the lawns opposite Parliament House. They were protesting the McMahon government's denial of Aboriginal land rights and quickly became a potent symbol of Aboriginal resistance to the repression and violence enacted by the State. In 2015, the Tent Embassy remains outside Old Parliament House, symbolising the fight for land rights, constitutional recognition and Aboriginal sovereignty. Importantly, it is not a historical artefact—as a symbolic site of Aboriginal political resistance, it will stay at the foot of Old Parliament House until such time as Aboriginal sovereignty is properly implemented and recognised.

If the history of the Tent Embassy affirms that any move away from its current site can only occur under certain conditions, how then are we to interpret Heiss's re-visioning of Australian history? In line with the discussion of humour followed throughout this paper, Heiss's treatment of the Tent Embassy could simply be another instance of her ironic impulse at play. It is no coincidence that the Tent Embassy is moved into the old Country Party Rooms. If Old Parliament House symbolises the imposition of white colonial power and the usurpation of an unceded Aboriginal sovereignty, the old Country Party rooms epitomise its most conservative voices. Thus, in the same way that locating the NAG within Old Parliament House allows Heiss to dislodge hegemonic narratives of white supremacy and reinstate Australia's First People at the centre of power, repositioning the Tent Embassy in the old Country Rooms briskly (and humorously) sweeps away any remaining ghosts of the past.

Alongside this arresting note of irony, however, there is the potential that Heiss's humour transgresses other potent political taboos, chiefly the substantial symbolic heft associated with the Tent Embassy's position *outside* old Parliament House. Uprooting the Tent Embassy without a concomitant change in Australia's political or social landscape could indicate that it has fallen prey to the more conservative political elements of Australian politics that see it as unnecessary and redundant. While it is certainly true that the Tent Embassy's movement inside the NAG is positioned as a happy and wholly welcome corollary of the NAG's creation, neither *Paris Dreaming* nor *Manhattan Dreaming* imagines an Australian political landscape filled with the markers that bespeak sovereignty. Heiss's Aboriginal characters certainly act with agency; they are independent subjects, proud of who they are and possessed of a well-calibrated political consciousness. Yet, neither restitution and reparation for past injustices, nor the enactment of a treaty, nor the right to self-determination, nor constitutional recognition are present in Heiss's chick lit. Consequently, the NAG and its absorption of the Tent Embassy could best be thought of as a fictional parenthesis in an otherwise realistic depiction of recent Australian history, rather than signalling a significant shift in the political status of Aboriginal Australian people.

Moreover the creation of the NAG is framed as obviating the need for the Tent Embassy: the arts are held to subsume and replace more explicit expressions of political will. The history of the NAG, recounted at the beginning of *Manhattan Dreaming*, suggests that the arts are the primary currency in which Aboriginal people must conduct their political transactions: while the government flatly refuses Old Parliament House as a state-sanctioned space for an Aboriginal Embassy (48), it is far more amenable to its use as a gallery. This privileging of the arts over politics reflects Heiss's own decision to channel her political agenda through literature. For Heiss, 'the only real platform for a voice in the mainstream as I see it is our arts



sector, which has a longstanding strong foundation' (*Am I Black Enough?* 161); she goes on to reiterate that 'the arts are a fantastic tool not only for expressing identity and politics but also for learning about them' (*Am I Black Enough?* 164).

Though Heiss's treatment of the Tent Embassy can be explained by her preference for the arts over politics, consideration of the broader generic framework in which the Tent Embassy is located is equally necessary. As argued throughout this paper, using the chick lit genre to promulgate an explicitly political message is, perhaps inevitably, an exercise in compromise. Stretching the genre in terms of its racial politics means that other aspects, often subject to social or political taboo, take on a heavier, ironic tone. Just as Heiss's fiction treats homophobia as a political issue of secondary importance (thus making it available as a source of humour), Heiss's memorialisation of the Tent Embassy is a move laced with heavy irony. The Tent Embassy, though part of a proud history of Aboriginal endurance and opposition, represents an out-dated model of resistance for someone like Heiss and her fictional counterparts: their resistance to white cultural hegemony is expressed through appropriating and laying claim to mainstream markers of success. Heiss enjoys informing readers and audiences 'I don't wear ochre, I wear Revlon or Avon, or Clinique . . . I don't tell the time by using the sun; rather, I tell the time by Dolce and Gabbana' (*Am I Black Enough?* 121). These sentiments, keenly present in Heiss's female protagonists who share her love of nice cars, sparkling jewellery and designer clothes, epitomise a new form of resistance that locates itself within mainstream Australian culture, rather than by protesting outside.

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On Valentine's Day, *Not Meeting Mr Right*'s Alice Aigner receives an extravagant bunch of red roses. Searching her crowded office for a place to put them, she is struck by a note of dissonance: '[the roses] looked a little out of place with the NAIDOC posters on the wall and the Aboriginal flag draped on the door ...' (252). Reflecting further on the aesthetic incongruity the roses threaten to create, she reasons to herself that 'the pretty and the political didn't seem to blend well, but there was no reason why they shouldn't' (253). Though Alice resolves her dilemma readily enough, this is not so easily settled within the broader context of Heiss's fiction. By pulling the pretty (taken here as shorthand for the chick lit genre) into the political arena, other, more conservative elements of the genre come sharply into view, and humour is displaced onto subjects generally treated as taboo or politically sensitive.

The destabilisation of the chick lit genre explored in this paper bears witness to the difficulties involved in blending the pretty with the political, particularly when humour is a necessary generic feature. Yet this is perhaps not as remarkable as I have made out. The chick lit novel, for one, is a profoundly contested space. Post-feminist critiques highlight concerns with the type of gender politics foregrounded by the genre. For their part, Butler and Desai use critical race theory to problematise post-feminism's preoccupation with gender, to the exclusion of race. And the chick lit novel is frequently brought into ongoing debates about the value of women's writing. This paper, by revealing the depth and complexity of Heiss's fiction, puts forward the case for further scholarly engagement with her work. Heiss's fiction also forms the basis for a larger claim pursued in this paper, namely that the chick lit genre is surprisingly elastic in its ability to accommodate an eclectic mix of voices and values, providing a commercially viable way for the marginal to appropriate—or at the very least, engage with—the mainstream. This elasticity nonetheless has its limits: stretch the genre too far, and it snaps back with unexpected force.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Guerrero and Cecilia Farr contest the critical tendency to link the genesis of the chick lit novel with *Bridget Jones's Diary*, arguing for Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* instead. As Farr puts it, 'despite [*Waiting to Exhale's*] chick lit themes of sisterhood and identity, fashion and romance; despite its privileged, professional main characters; and despite its fabulous commercial success, McMillan's 1992 novel is bypassed for *Bridget Jones*, published in 1996' (203).

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in her oeuvre, Heiss permits a more complex view of homosexuality. The main protagonist in *Avoiding Mr Right* becomes close friends with Josie, a lesbian parking inspector who confidently saunters the streets of St Kilda. A far cry from the limited stereotypes of lesbianism presented in *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Josie's subjectivity is fleshed out and developed. It could be however, that this character was written to defray the damaging stereotypes of homosexuality perpetuated in the first *Mr Right* novel.

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