The Image of Black Western Journalists in Novels: Fact or Fiction?

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The UK and the USA are two of the wealthiest, most powerful democracies in the world. Democracy, as my co-author and I assert in our book*, Journalism, Culture and Society* (Douglas and Phillips, 2022, p. 203) "rests on the normative assumption that governance works best when the voices of all people are heard […]. However, people and ideas do not have equal access to publicity and equal weight in the public sphere." For Black women in particular, this failure of democracy, the public sphere and the role of the news media within it, comes into sharp focus in Britain and America. Research on women's experiences in newsrooms around the world (Kassova, 2022) reveals that if you are a woman of color in America, news stories where you are featured as the protagonist are rare to non-existent. The lack of visibility in content is reflected in editorial roles, where women of color are significantly underrepresented compared to their proportion in the US working population. In the UK meanwhile:

> "Women of color are more marginalized in news leadership […] than in any other researched country. […]. Moreover, women of color are experiencing extraordinary levels of exclusion and remain invisible within news organizations and the news industry, both as leaders and as protagonists in news stories." (Kassova, 2022, no page number)

The failure of 'mainstream'[1] US and UK news media organizations to adequately include and represent women of color at the level of production and in content contributes to White Western bias remaining a persistent issue in dominant US and UK news organizations (see also Hanitzsch, 2019). The marginalization of certain demographics due to a range of factors, including socio-economic status, gender, religion, and race, in 'mainstream' newsrooms and news content harms democracy, which is already in crisis (Abramowitz, 2018). As studies highlight (e.g. Neff and Pickard, 2021), democracy relies on an informed,

[1] The constantly evolving nature of the news ecosystem means it's difficult to define 'mainstream' news. Furthermore, as Phillips (2015, p.9) notes, what's deemed 'mainstream' vis-à-vis news "changes depending on where you happen to be standing." Hence, I place 'mainstream' in quotation marks to acknowledge its contingent nature.

engaged, and empowered public. Unsurprisingly, there is a correlation between the underrepresentation of global majority people and others from marginalized groups amongst journalists in dominant Western newsrooms and the range of stories that get covered (Thrasher, 2017; Cobb, 2018; Byrne, 2019). When newsrooms exclude or misrepresent communities, they fail in their democratic duty - limiting visibility, distorting truth, weakening civic participation and undermining trust in news (Arguedas *et al.*, 2023; Arguedas, Mukherjee and Nielsen, 2023; Bettis and Low, 2024).

Black women journalists' identities and histories, like all journalists, contribute to the negotiation and production of cultural, political and economic capital that structures the journalistic field globally and strengthens the democratic process. But these factors, and the experiences of Black journalists in their professional lives, are under researched, particularly in the UK context (see also Douglas, 2021; Gold, 2021). Furthermore, despite a substantial body of research outlining effective strategies for advancing diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI), such recommendations are often underutilized within news organizations in the US and Britain (FT Report, 2024), and their implementation is increasingly hindered by the prevailing political climate (Scire, 2025). This paper argues that fictionalized accounts of Black women journalists, written by Black women authors who have lived experience of the British and American journalistic field, offer important insight into frequently overlooked perspectives. Not only do they provide nuanced reflections on the racialized and gendered realities of professional life in 'mainstream' US and UK journalism, but they also underscore the critical contributions of Black women journalists. Encouraging and nurturing their[2] careers is essential for both national and global journalism to improve and remain relevant - by engaging diverse publics and facilitating inclusive participation in public discourse.

I consider the representation of Black women journalists in the novels *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams, which is set in the UK, and *As the Wicked Watch* by Tamron Hall, set in the USA. I concur with Seaton's (Curran and Seaton, 2018, p. 430) assertion that popular culture plays an important role in not only entertaining audiences, but also challenging power by contributing new ways to comprehend reality and imagine how it could or *should* be. Both novels undertake this task by addressing a critical gap in the scholarly and cultural understanding of the experiences of Black women journalists in Britain and the United States, particularly the discrimination they encounter and its consequential impact on

[2] I caveat this with the acknowledgement that one's racial identity, as with all identity markers, is no guarantee of diversity of perspective or views that differ from dominant norms.

media content generally, as well as narratives specifically centered on Black protagonists. By offering alternative modes of representing some of the experiences of Black journalists, the novels contribute to a deeper understanding that 'mainstream' Western journalism - as well as the predominantly Western-centric, White-dominated field of journalism studies (Aujla-Sidhu, 2022) - have largely failed to achieve.

The difference in 'habitus' (Bourdieu, in Benson and Neveu, 2005) between Black and White journalists, and the way lived experience informs ways of seeing, story selection and framing, coupled with the extent to which habitus gels with the 'doxa', or rules and norms of newsrooms, is a dominant theme in both novels. Whilst these dynamics are complex and manifest in multiple ways in the novels, I focus on how the stories elucidate racist and patriarchal norms within 'mainstream' UK and US newsrooms. Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (2005), Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality (1989), Patricia Hill Collins' standpoint theory (1998, 2000) and the critical work of Toni Morrison (1997) and Audre Lorde (2018) offer a rich interdisciplinary framework through which to unpack this central thread.

Using theory to illuminate the representation of Black women journalists in fiction

In her influential essay, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Audre Lorde writes:

> "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable." (Lorde, 2018, p. 17).

I suggest that by drawing on their habitus as Black authors who have experience of the journalistic field, and who use their fictional protagonists' habitus to illustrate how racist, patriarchal norms within and outside journalism manifest, is to use *different tools* to examine those norms. The authors use their standpoints (Hill Collins, 1998) as Black women authors and journalists to centre the outsider-within experiences of Black women as a marginalized group in the US and the UK. By privileging accounts of Black women, Carty-Williams and Hall highlight patterns of thought and ways of *seeing* and *doing* that members of dominant groups may not recognize. Thus, their fiction is subversive – offering an opportunity to foster new understanding and *broaden* parameters of change.

The holistic nature of accounts of the social and political world that standpoint theory demands, especially the way it's designed to incorporate the experiences of Black people in knowledge production (Hill Collins, ibid), make it well matched to field theory (Bourdieu, 1998; Benson and Neveu, 2005), which calls for a holistic mapping of societal fields.

However, other than a few exceptions (e.g. Douglas, 2021) race is largely absent from Bourdieu's conception of field theory and its application within journalism studies, where it is used as a conceptual interpretation of how power works in newsrooms and the agency of journalists. Standpoint theory compliments an approach grounded in field theory because it enables researchers to map race onto the dynamics between journalists' habitus and the institutional structures (doxa) in which they work, by privileging accounts of the social world by marginalized groups, such as Black women who work for 'mainstream' British and US news institutions (see also Douglas, 2025). Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) adds another valuable theoretical layer that can be deployed to unpack what plays out in the novels. This is because the concept explicitly focuses attention on structural inequality and, in its original conception, how racial structural inequality is compounded by gender in majority White worlds, making Black women doubly marginalized.

Surviving not thriving

A question both novels prompt is: what happens when you survive in conditions that are not structured to enable your ability to thrive? In telling fictionalized accounts of some of the realities for, and perceptions of, Black women journalists and Black subjects of news stories, *Queenie* and *As the Wicked Watch* help convert mostly obscured issues and experiences into public concerns. The novels speak to serious systemic problems that are being dangerously undermined by some politicians in the USA and the UK via attempts to diminish critical race and Black feminist theory, and weaponize calls for social justice (Adams, 2022; Hartocollis and Fawcett, 2023). Both novels illuminate "processes of our common life" (Williams in Curran, 1991, p.33 in Douglas and Phillips, 2022, p. 1). They do so by addressing the intersectional nature of racialized and gendered violence - and the subsequent trauma - experienced by many Black women in their professional and personal lives (Ingram, 2020; Daniels and Douglas, 2025; Thomas, 2025; Wong *et al.*, 2025). The systemic character of this violence and trauma is not only harmful to individuals but detrimental to society as a whole, as the enduring legacies of racism and sexism continue to permeate and shape our institutions - from education and law enforcement to the judiciary and media organizations (Kanu, 2021; Lewis, Roberts and Long, 2023; Bettis and Low, 2024; *PBS*, 2024; Grace, 2025; Kotecha and Mowafi, 2025; White, 2025). By fleshing out the lives of Black women journalists as they navigate these and other societal systems, the novels contribute to challenging the aforementioned marginalization of Black women journalists in the UK and the USA, and the racist treatment of Black news subjects and race related issues.

Fictionalized facts

A thriller that addresses the structural neglect of Black women and girls who go missing in the USA and/or are victims of violence, *As the Wicked Watch* follows Chicago based crime reporter Jordan Manning as she pursues a story about murdered teenager Masey James. Determined to see James' killer brought to justice, Manning puts her broadcast news career and life on the line to ensure that a story that is being mostly ignored by the 'mainstream' press and dismissed by the police is taken seriously. As the narrative unfolds, the glaring disparities in the treatment of Black people and White people who go missing and/or are victims of violent crime emerge, with emphasis on the differential responses by the police and 'mainstream' news media. This enduring injustice occurs in both the USA, where Black communities are disproportionately affected by missing persons cases (Corlette, 2022), and the UK. In Britain, for instance, the tragic case of sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, two women of color who went missing and were murdered in 2020, received comparatively less coverage by 'mainstream' UK news organizations than the equally tragic case of Sarah Everard, a White woman who went missing and was found dead in 2021 (Douglas and Phillips, 2022).

Not only does *As the Wicked Watch* focus on a Black family dealing with the trauma of their missing daughter, humanizing them and her in a manner that 'mainstream' US media rarely does (Kaur, 2019), crucially the novel also reveals the inner life of Manning, the Black woman journalist protagonist. In doing so, *As the Wicked Watch* draws out themes that are pertinent to Black women journalists working in White dominated newsrooms in Britain and America. Chief among them is the burden of representation and the way Black women reporters experience the journalistic field as an intersectional zone, where marginalization and exclusion faced by all journalists of color in majority White newsrooms (Ingram, 2020; Douglas, 2021; Gottfried et al., 2022) are compounded by gender. As Hall writes in the opening chapter, relaying Manning's musings on the dynamic between her and a White male cameraman:

> "The irony of us falling into stereotypical gender roles was particularly strange in a business where independent, successful women still keep secrets about gender bias and sexual harassment while reporting on these very matters." (Hall, 2021 p.2)

While *As the Wicked Watch* centers on Manning's everyday experiences as a journalist, in *Queenie* the protagonist's journalism career plays a secondary, supporting role in the story. The title character experiences 'everyday racism' (see also Essed, 1991) and sexism in her

personal life, which intensifies as the story unfolds. This plays out strongly in relation to Queenie's difficult relationships and unhealthy sexual experiences with White and South-Asian men who fetishize her blackness. These encounters partially inform her shift from a disengaged journalist who works on listings for the newspaper's culture section, to a more motivated reporter who feels compelled to address race-related issues. The covert and overt sexual and racial abuse Queenie is exposed to, and the subsequent physical and psychological pain she endures, function as metaphors for the wider pain of Black people harmed by structural violence in the US and the UK. They demonstrate the way the consequences of these dynamics do not get adequately articulated in the dominant public sphere, placing a burden of representation on Black journalists working within this space. This is powerfully relayed in Chapter 6 when Queenie writes a pitch to her White editor, Gina:

> "I scrolled Tumblr for articles about the most recent protest in America, reading long-form pieces from eyewitnesses, their words broken up by the pictures of black men and women being surrounded by police in riot gear or having milk poured on their faces to numb the sting of tear gas. The next article showed a video of a young black man called Rashan Charles being choked in an east London shop by an undercover police officer. I attached two articles to a pitch I'd painstakingly composed for Gina titled, 'Racial tension: US or us?'" (Carty-Williams, 2019, p. 97)

The pressures of being a racialized media practitioner shouldering the burden of representation, discussions of which feature in much scholarly work on race in the cultural industries (e.g. Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Saha, 2017), also infiltrate the friendship between Queenie and her White colleague Darcy. This plays out in several ways, including when Darcy casually assumes that "another Black man" Queenie tells her was killed by the police "in America today" must have done something wrong. After correcting Darcy in a tense moment in the office kitchen, Queenie leaves for a cigarette, wanting to avoid saying something she'll "regret" and wishing that "well-meaning white liberals would think before they said things that they thought were perfectly innocent" (Carty-Williams, 2019, p. 99).

Jordan, in *As the Wicked Watch*, has similar encounters with her White colleagues. She comments generally on "the tone-deaf remarks from my newsroom colleagues about race" (Hall, 2021, p. 96), and Hall details specific micro-aggressions Jordan contends with throughout the novel. In one scene, Jordan's White cameraman, Scott, racially profiles three young Black men who are standing on the street, implying that they are a potential threat. When Jordan points out that they are simply waiting at a bus stop and asks why Scott didn't notice this, she registers Scott's embarrassment at being called out and observes: "It was a

teaching moment I couldn't pass up." Underscoring elements of their different racialized habitus' and the ways in which it shapes perspectives and subsequent journalistic framing, she tells Scott:

> "You know, how a person sees three Black men looks different depending on who you are and how and where you grew up," I said.
>
> "Yes, I know. Fine. Let's drop it. I didn't see the sign," he said.
>
> "Everything's not about race, Jordan," he said.
>
> *No, he didn't*. "It is for those three young Black men. How people see them through the lens of race impacts how their teachers see them, how police interact with them. Will they see a suspect when he's the victim or just a guy waiting on a bus? Black people have been killed for less." (ibid, p.100)

Habitus and History in As the Wicked Watch

Early in the novel, it becomes evident that the past plays a crucial role in shaping the "historical trajectory" through which Jordan's habitus has been formed, as theorized by Bourdieu and elaborated by Benson and Neveu (2005, p. 3). The residual effects of this past - including Jordan's lived experiences as a Black American woman - influence her position within the journalistic field and inform her approach to the story of the missing teenage girl, Masey James. Additionally, Hall illustrates how racialized histories shape the attitudes of White characters toward both Jordan and Masey.

The past and the way it informs Jordan's habitus and is drawn on to contextualize Masey's disappearance, is initially referenced geographically as Manning and her White cameraman, Scott, drive along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, trying to find a spot to set up a live broadcast about the missing teenager. The name of the road is a pertinent reminder of stolen dreams and dashed hopes, losses also conveyed by the disintegrating posters of Masey that Jordan and Scott pass. The fading images of the bright, effervescent Black girl who "had just started attending this awesome STEM school…dotes on her little brother and her cousin's baby girl…shops in her mother's closet and redoes her nails every day" (p.15) work as a metaphor for the historically Black neighborhood they are pinned up in. The area was once "known as the Black Metropolis, an enclave of upper-middle-class artists and entertainers, business owners and numbers runners […] built on black wealth, but the ups and downs of an economy not built on fairness had taken its toll" (p.8).

Past and present structural racism, which led to the demise of this once flourishing Black community, frame the story of Masey's disappearance. Her body is found hidden amongst rubbish and overgrown weeds in a neglected playground, which is aptly named in honor of the Black investigative journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett. We learn that the community's calls for the park authorities to clear and restore the play area have long fallen on deaf ears. This, coupled with the failure of the police to take Masey's disappearance seriously, categorizing her as a runaway and disregarding her mother's insistence that that behavior is out of character, speak to the all too common realities for economically deprived Black and Brown communities in the USA and the UK, which are neglected by those in power[3].

Jordan's standpoint and habitus as a Black woman journalist reporting on Masey's story motivate her to do the story justice. She is determined to ensure that racist histories, that all too often negatively influence journalistic coverage of racialized groups, do not lead to Masey's story being mis- or under-reported by the predominantly White news organization Jordan works for. She also conveys the awareness by Masey's mother (Pam) of racially biased news reporting, and the burden that this places on grieving parents of Black children to work harder to be heard:

> "Unlike the Buford girls, who were White, missing Black children don't typically receive the same amount of ink and airtime that missing White kids do. I'm convinced that one of the reasons Pam had shared so many mundane details with me about Masey is to make me care about her daughter." (Hall, 2021, p. 20)

Tension mounts for Jordan as she mediates between her habitus and standpoint as someone who is socially situated in ways that mean she has different perspectives from her non-marginalized colleagues and sources in relation to issues pertaining to race, and the construction of news stories about Black people. Her habitus and standpoint are depicted as working for and against her in the White dominated journalistic field. On the positive side, Jordan gains access to Black centered stories that a White journalist might not, due largely to persistent racial stereotypes that often shape 'mainstream' Western news reporting and the resulting distrust of such media among misrepresented communities.

[3] Horrendous contemporary examples of this include Hurricane Katrina and the Grenfell Tower fire.

> "Because I am a Black woman in this job, there is an unspoken acknowledgement by people in my community of the struggle that it took for me to get where I am. I'm media but also kin. They want me here. In moments like this, when I feel people's distrust of the media melt away, I feel like a local." (ibid, p.90)

Black privilege (Douglas, 2025) vis-à-vis certain stories affords Black journalists greater access in the field than their White colleagues. Jordan's blackness is also seen as an advantage by her White boss who uses racially coded language to rationalize keeping her on the Masey James story:

> "As I exited Peter's office, something he said struck me as odd. "You're in the community," he'd said. […] Or he simply meant, "You're Black and they trust you. So you might as well stick with the story." (ibid, p.181)

Hall skillfully conveys the way White owned, male dominated institutions benefit from the cultural and/or economic capital (both intrinsic to Bourdieu's conception of fields) that blackness and/or femaleness brings in the way of access to specific stories without needing to address structural racial and gendered disparities within their organization (see also Leong, 2013 ;Douglas, 2021). The character Ellen Holbrook, for example, who is described as Jordan's "newsroom BFF", is a White assistant news editor and the only woman occupying a senior role:

> "Chicago's newsrooms aren't nearly as diverse as the city is. Ellen, in fact, is the only high-ranking female news executive at Chicago's four major networks, and there's not one general manager who is Black, Latino, or Asian. So whenever a high-profile case touches the live wire of race or gender, the trepidation reporters feel over saying the wrong thing and being called out for it can lead to animus that spills over into the work environment." (Hall, 2021, p.279)

Jordan's predominantly White, male newsroom gains racial capital, which Leong defines as "the economic and social value derived from an individual's racial identity, whether by that individual, by other individuals, or by institutions" (Leong, 2013, p. 2190), by having Jordan on the Masey James story. But the value Jordan brings, in the same way any talented, committed journalist adds value to their newsroom, doesn't protect her from being disparaged in her workplace. In one incident, Jordan is verbally attacked by a White male colleague, Keith, during a heated editorial discussion regarding the suspected wrongful arrest of three Black boys for Masey's murder. Their arrest draws national media attention, demonstrating the problematic nature of 'mainstream' Western news values where the racist "violent Black boy" trope grabs national headlines, but the missing Black girl story does not. In a classic display of performative allyship, the meeting begins with Jordan and Keith's

boss, Nussbaum, acknowledging Jordan's hard work on the Masey story despite the lack of institutional support for Jordan. In an unexpected move, Nussbaum also highlights the habitus that all journalists carry into institutional spaces, meaning no reporting is ever objective:

> "Jordan, I'm calling you out. You've been on this story since the beginning. I know you think we failed off the top for having a blind spot when it came to covering the story and giving it the attention it should've received from the start, and you were right," Nussbaum said. "And those are the things we have to come to grips with. What kind of baggage are we carrying into the newsroom? And are we as guilty as anybody else of valuing one type of person over another?" (Hall, 2021, p. 283)

Despite the positive opening and professed solidarity by Nussbaum, described as a "White news executive from the more conservative northern part of Illinois" who "had spent his career turning a blind eye to the constant dehumanization of Black men and boys by the media" (ibid, p.268), the meeting turns sour when Jordan clashes with Keith. He undermines Jordan's professional integrity, accusing her of believing that the three accused boys are innocent just "because they're Black." He then suggests that she thinks "the only way a person can understand someone is if they're from their neighborhood" (ibid, pp. 284-85). His racially coded language is not challenged by anyone in the meeting, including Ellen, Jordan's White workplace friend. Jordan is left to defend herself and eventually leaves the meeting early. She is all too aware of the racialized and gendered dynamics at play. But she is determined to stay with the story despite the toll workplace microaggressions take. She is also carrying the weight of the trauma of the story and her sense that she is being used by her organization and some police sources because she is "the most visible Black woman at the station" (ibid, pp.8-9) and they are keen to distance themselves from justified accusations of racism.

Beyond Jordan's strong investigative journalism skills, her personal background and perspective, as noted earlier, also drive her to pursue Masey's story. She identifies with Masey due to their shared ethnicity and is motivated by the underreporting of violence against Black women. This shared identity and awareness of media bias push Jordan to take on a story that is often overlooked, especially in the male dominated field of crime reporting:

> "The more I learned about Masey James, the more I saw myself in her. Young, gifted, and Black. Hungry for knowledge and motivated by change." (Hall, 2021, p. 38)

Because of this, even though Jordan is conscious of being racially profiled as a Black journalist in the way that Pritchard and Stonbley (2007) find people of color are limited to

telling stories about their 'communities', while White journalists are permitted to write about anything, Jordan actively chooses to cover events where Black lives are centered. Not only does she draw on her habitus to push such stories onto the dominant news agenda and ensure they are told in as holistic a way as possible, but she also actively refutes racism. This includes the:

> "perception by the police and others, including our newsroom colleagues, that Black reporters are incapable of reporting on what's happening in our community without bias. We instantly become part of the story if the suspects or victims are Black." (Hall, 2021, p. 271)

The way racialized habitus impact the news choices of all journalists, Black, Brown and White, is also addressed by academics (e.g. Campbell and Cheryl D. Jenkins, 2016; Douglas, 2021; Douglas and Phillips, 2022). But as Douglas and Phillips observe:

> "The historical tendency to view whiteness as universal and, thus, invisible means that White journalists often fail to see race as a factor that influences their reporting." (Douglas and Phillips, 2022, p. 59)

As Stuart Hall writes and as standpoint theory, combined with field theory, demonstrates:

> "Our cultural understanding of the world informs our 'maps of meaning' (Hall, 1997), and therefore, how we interpret events. So, if a journalist's 'understanding' of…any racialised group, has been learned in limited ways, via racially stereotypical representations, rather than in nuanced and limitless ways perhaps through familial or friendship ties or because they identify as belonging to that group …, this may lead that journalist to perpetuate, rather than question and contest, stereotypes. Likewise, if journalists don't have lived experience of forms of discrimination, such as ableism, homophobia, sexism and Islamophobia, they may miss problematic aspects of coverage that those who do have lived experience may spot." (Douglas and Phillips, 2022, pp. 59–60)

Tamron Hall expresses this bridging of the private and public, the personal and political, throughout the book. For Jordan, this occurs in an intersectional sense because, as noted, she relates to Masey as a fellow Black woman. For the wider community in the area where Masey's body is found, the bridging of private and public is overtly racial, as is conveyed in one of Jordan's news bulletins:

> "Tonight residents will assemble to express their pain over the loss of another Black child and their interminable displeasure with the systems – the police, city hall, the parks – that have failed them again and again. They intend to stand in solidarity with a distraught mother who is *one of their own*." (Hall, 2021, p. 71, emphasis added)

In her essay, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1997), Toni Morrison writes of how the violent silencing of black bodies "is a major theme in American literature" (Morrison, 1997, p. 82). While violence perpetrated against black bodies is a dominant theme in *As the Wicked Watch*, Hall subverts this silencing and the related devaluing of Black lives (see also Mbembe, 2003) by giving Masey, who would otherwise have been doubly silenced – not just by her killer, but by the press and State authorities, a voice. In rendering in such detail the story of the missing girl, her family's pain, the complicity of State authorities, the dominant news media, the role of the public, both Black, White, friends and strangers, Hall refuses to facilitate for the reader "the projection of the not-me" (Morrison, 1997, p. 82). This projection, Morrison observes, is inherent in the construction of blackness in America and Europe. Both European and American Africanism, Morrison asserts, created a "fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire" out of black slavery and colonialism to "allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation" (ibid, p.83). Hall attempts to leave no room for any such rationalization or allaying of fears. The author underscores the urgent need for systemic change and collective accountability by weaving together the *collective* failings and lack of sustained attention, particularly of State authorities and the news media, that lead to violence inflicted against countless Black women in America:

> "Again and again, she is called to cover the murders of Black women, many of them sexually assaulted, most brutalized, and all of them quickly forgotten." (Hall, p. 50)

Sources and issues of trust

Hall's novel is not just about operating as a Black journalist in White dominated worlds. It also addresses, as highlighted above, how Black journalists may gain privileged access to Black sources. Such sources might not speak as freely to White journalists, including about the complicity of Black people in Masey's disappearance. Louise Robinson's character exemplifies the paradoxical dynamics of complicity with oppressive systems that can manifest within marginalized communities. As a Black woman activist, Robinson occupies a fraught position at the intersection of resistance to, and accommodation of, injustice: her earlier campaigns urging municipal authorities to regenerate the neighborhood - including the park that becomes the site where Masey's body is found - reflect a commitment to collective uplift and spatial justice. Yet, Robinson's later decision to shield the perpetrator, even as she publicly demands justice for the victim, exposes the fractures underpinning her

activism. Robinson's contradictory actions illuminate the tensions between moral integrity and pragmatic survival, revealing how systems of oppression compel individuals to navigate morally ambivalent terrain in the pursuit of justice.

Robinson's protective actions toward the vulnerable young Black man she fostered - a character revealed to be Masey's killer - highlight the structural disadvantages faced by Black boys, as well as the relative public awareness and societal response to this issue. In contrast, they also underscore the lack of awareness and corresponding inaction concerning the systemic inequalities endured by Black girls in America and other predominantly White countries. As Crenshaw highlights (2015, p.28), because of "the narrow claim that data show men and boys of color to be exceptionally disadvantaged – an argument that Georgetown law professor Paul Butler calls 'Black male exceptionalism', the structural inequalities that obstruct and cut short the lives of Black girls are marginalized, or entirely erased, at a micro and macro level. The significant societal barriers and injustices Black men and boys face are repeated so often that leaders, stakeholders and even excluded women have been led to believe that the exclusion of girls and women is not only justified but necessary. The actual data, however, suggest otherwise. A study[4] …reveals that while Black girls face some of the same challenges that destroy the life chances of their brothers, they also face many that are different." These differences include gendered violence, which Hall attends to in the novel. Robinson's character embodies the way that "even excluded women" (ibid) may become complicit in unconsciously reinforcing dominant norms - a process Bourdieu terms symbolic violence. The novel subtly illustrates the way that the symbolic violence committed by Robinson is rooted in dominant discourse and agenda-setting in the political and media spheres. This is operationalized via policies devised to support disadvantaged Black boys and men (Crenshaw, 2015) and the subsequent media attention, both positive and negative, that this demographic receives, which obscures "the structural conditions facing all youth of color" (ibid, p.28).

Hall deftly uses fiction to convey these cruel, complex realities and the power of journalists, particularly those who are equipped with a particular standpoint and habitus, to reveal them in nuanced ways. Via Jordan's character, Hall illustrates how race functions as a containing category within White dominated journalistic fields. This occurs via the external expectations that Jordan should cover the Masey James story. Also depicted is how race

[4] The study (Butler, 2013) referred to argues for an intersectional approach to analysis of racism in order to achieve gendered parity regarding the way racial injustice is mitigated.

operates as a broader category in which global majority journalists may position themselves, depending on their habitus and capital (Douglas, 2021). Jordan possesses enough capital within her newsroom to push Masey's story onto the agenda and keep it there. But as a Black woman journalist navigating the racial and gendered microaggressions of the 'mainstream' U.S. news media industry, Jordan bears the mental and physical toll of reporting on intersectional violence that would likely go unacknowledged without her intervention. This strain reflects a reality experienced by many racialized journalists who cover race-related issues, particularly black trauma (Ingram, 2020; Douglas, 2021; Al-Kaisy, 2023).

Ultimately, the contemporary US journalistic field in *As The Wicked Watch* is convincingly depicted as an intersectional zone for Black women. It is a zone in which violence begets violence, from the everyday racism and sexism Jordan contends with in her workplace to the violence committed against a Black female victim of crime ignored by White, male dominated media. There is also the violence of the State: the police dismissing Masey as a runaway, botching the investigation into her disappearance, then wrongfully convicting three Black boys for her murder. The violence that neglected, traumatized communities may inflict on one another is conveyed via the activist, Louise Robinson, and her foster son. Finally, there is the violence perpetrated against Jordan who becomes targeted by her colleagues for pursuing the story. Jordan is also targeted by those beyond the journalistic field who are at risk of having their crimes exposed due to her dogged pursuit of the story.

Queenie

Queenie's experiences of racialized discursive and physical violence occur overtly outside the newsroom in her personal life, and more covertly inside the newsroom. The novel begins with Queenie at a gynecology appointment. She is accompanied by her Aunt Maggie, who takes the opportunity to have a dig at Queenie's White boyfriend, Tom, pointing out that he should be at the hospital with Queenie. Maggie reprimands Queenie, saying: "You're the one who thought she found her white saviour. And now look!" This establishes the tone of the novel, where relationships and friendships are portrayed with all their inherent complexities, while race, racism, and sexism emerge as overarching themes that permeate both the personal and journalistic dimensions of the narrative.

Throughout the novel Queenie's blackness is *seen* by men who fetishize her and *not seen* by those who deny and/or are willfully blind to their racism and that of others. This, coupled with the negative sexual encounters she has with men, has a profound effect on

Queenie's self-esteem, which is already damaged due to her difficult childhood.

The novel challenges the normative ways that sympathy is constituted in majority White Western societies and the way Black women's pain is left out of this. We see how this lack of societal compassion emboldens some men to mistreat and abuse Queenie, and we are shown the consequences of this as Queenie's mental health deteriorates. The intersectional violence, both physical and discursive, that she encounters lead her to fall through the cracks. It is largely thanks to some family members and friends, including her White middle-class colleague Darcy, that Queenie manages to find a way back to herself.

It's in the newsroom, during an exchange with Darcy, that Queenie begins to try and pick up the pieces. She recalls how hard she worked to get into journalism and decides that she needs to start addressing the "serious things going on in the world that need reporting," which the paper she works for isn't covering. These include, "the killings of unarmed black men and women in their droves at the hands of police, here and in the US" (ibid, p.77) and "mass gentrification" (ibid, p.77). Darcy is supportive and listens, but her ignorance means Queenie is often tasked with having to explain.

The different lens Queenie has on the world becomes increasingly apparent as the story progresses. The delineation of the distinct habitus' and standpoints between her and her White friends and journalist colleagues vis-à-vis race-related issues is contrasted with Queenie's relationship with her Black female friend, Kyazike. Their friendship provides insight into the comfort and solidarity that can arise from shared standpoints between individuals inhabiting Black bodies within predominantly White spaces. Carty-Williams depicts this unspoken connection in a range of ways, sometimes via the insider jokes Queenie and Kyazike share, and sometimes via their response to racist incidents that those who are not Black may be oblivious to. During a night out together, for instance, a White woman in a club touches Queenie's hair without asking. When Kyazike reprimands the White woman, a bouncer displays compassion towards the White woman and aggression towards Kyazike and Queenie, ordering them to leave:

> "We're leaving your shit club anyway," Kyazike told him. "But if you like your clientele reaching out to touch black people like we're animals in a petting zoo, then fair play, innit" (ibid, p.144).

Queenie and Kyazike also share painful conversations about racist police brutality:

> "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." (Carty-Williams, 2019, p. 207).

Queenie tries to address systemic racial violence through her journalistic work but finds that her habitus clashes with the doxa of her newsroom. In an exchange with another White friend, Cassandra, Queenie complains that whenever she pitches "things" she cares about to her White editor, Gina, the editor "always tells me they're not good enough. 'What things specifically?' Cassandra asked. 'Black Lives Matter things,' I told her." (ibid, p.141)

Following the killing of more Black men by the police in America, and a Black Lives Matter march that Queenie and Kyazike attend in London, Queenie tries to convince Gina to let her cover the issue. But she is blocked again in the kind of exchange that will be recognizable to many Black British journalists (see Douglas, 2021), particularly before George Floyd's murder and in the years following the initial outrage and the rapid retreat from racial reckoning in many 'mainstream' Western newsrooms (Tameez, 2025):

> "You know I used to send you all those pitches? It's just that – well, two more black men were shot in America this week by police. And I know that it's not here, though it does happen here, but – I was wondering if I could write something about it? It's just that nobody is really reporting it…"
>
> "The thing is, Queenie," Gina closed her laptop. "I know what you're saying, and I understand that it's awful. So awful. And if I could let you all write about every terrible thing that happened, I would, but I'm beholden to the powers that be […]. I just think that these matters are a little too, how should I put it? Radical for the *Daily Read*. […] How about we get some of that passion into a pitch for the magazine that's a bit more…palatable?" (Carty-Williams, 2019, p. 211)

Rather than maintaining the status quo and agreeing to reproduce institutional doxa, Queenie draws on an aspect of habitus that she shares with Gina – their gender – and intersects it with race to push the idea:

> "Well, I was thinking I could pitch something about how it would be great to see all the liberal white women who were tweeting fervently from the women's march at a Black Lives Matter march?" I said (ibid, p.211)

Finding common ground by linking the marches and, in the process, connecting Gina's habitus informed criteria for a story with her own, Queenie manages to cut through Gina's attempt to police the organizational doxa, albeit momentarily. Despite Gina giving her the go-ahead to pitch the story, Queenie leaves the editorial meeting feeling "defeated" and "alone" after her idea is swiftly knocked down by an older White male journalist with the now familiar "all lives matter" rebuke. He goes on to say that Black Lives Matter is "nonsense." When Queenie makes her case and looks to Gina for support in the "room full of

white not-quite-liberals whose opinions, like their money, had been inherited" (ibid, p.214), she is met with silence. This passage illustrates the way organizational doxa is reproduced via other people's silence and implicit compliance. Class is also foregrounded here as a significant marker of identity, which can result in journalists who do not conform to the prevailing doxa being marginalized and their ideas only gaining traction when echoed by individuals perceived by the dominant group as culturally "acceptable" (see also Douglas and Phillips, 2022).

Workplace racial microaggressions are strewn throughout the novel. These include the security guard in Queenie's office who doesn't believe she works for a newspaper (Carty-Williams, 2019, p. 182). Then there's the diversity poster she is cajoled into being featured in as one of just four "diverse members" of [the newspaper] staff (ibid, p.182); being told by an HR assistant that she is "very lucky to be working here!"…finishing with "Don't worry, my husband is black, so I know about you and your people" (ibid, p. 183); and being sent to cover an urban music act by her editor because she too is 'urban' - a euphemism for Black.

Carty-Williams's fictionalized account of Queenie's newsroom experiences will doubtless resonate with many Black British journalists working within 'mainstream' media organizations (see Douglas, 2021, 2025), as well as with those who actively seek to challenge and reshape these norms, striving to ensure that the contexts in which they are enacted more accurately reflect the diversity of society and the lives of its members. Central to this challenge, as *Queenie* and *As the Wicked Watch* illustrate, are Black journalists and diversity and inclusion campaigners who relentlessly chip away at structures - drawing on their habitus to illuminate problematic institutional doxa, and the racist, patriarchal norms that underpin its scaffolding. They encounter failure and success along the way (Douglas, 2021). Part of that success, as both novels illustrate, is bringing others along with you, including White allies: Darcy, Cassandra and Gina in Queenie's case. It's perhaps no surprise that these allies bond via their gender. That bond fosters an intimacy that gradually opens them - through a slow and often painful process, in which the burden of education falls disproportionately on Queenie - to a more intersectional understanding shaped by Queenie's experiences and their shared dialogues.

But Darcy, Cassandra and Gina also defend the status quo at different points in the book. These moments reveal how individuals who benefit from normative structures may be unintentionally unaware of the need for change - thereby illustrating how the realization of sustained systemic equality requires a critical interrogation of one's own positionality and privilege. Part of the power of *Queenie* is in the way this is subtly told - from Darcy's

aforementioned unthinking comments about the police shooting of an unarmed Black man, to Gina not attributing news value to Queenie's clearly newsworthy pitches and her policing of the newspaper's doxa vis-à-vis coverage of race-related issues. But both characters shift. Darcy becomes a close friend of Queenie's and learns not to be afraid to ask to have things explained that are outside her habitus. Importantly, she listens. Gina, meanwhile, eventually gives Queenie more space to write for the newspaper and confesses to Queenie that she should have "listened to you" in relation to a sexual and racial issue involving one of Queenie's White male colleagues.

As intersectionality and standpoint theory show us, Queenie's race, gender and class increase her exposure to negative experiences in predominantly White spaces. However, she also has a wealth of knowledge and expertise thanks to these markers of her identity, which is not available to those who occupy dominant positions. Queenie ends up using said knowledge constructively, defying those who try to weaponize it against her. The changes she makes extend to her personal life as well as her career, when she leaves her job and embarks on a new journalistic project platforming Black British voices.

Conclusion

Studies find that reading fiction increases empathy by exposing readers to a greater number of experiences than they would encounter in real life, including those that are vastly different from their own (Kelly, 2022). Quality journalism should have the same effect. By offering nuanced illustrations of the different experiences Black women journalists have in the UK and US journalistic field, *Queenie* and *As the Wicked Watch* demonstrate the opportunities, as well as the difficulties, that accompany socially constructed differences and the related hierarchies of power which shape Black women's personal and professional lives in Britain and the USA. In both countries, Black women are underrepresented in the journalistic field (Kassova, 2022), a persistent reality which extends to limited images of Black women journalists in popular culture. This is particularly the case in Britain where the recent adaptation of *Queenie* for Channel 4 television is one of the very few depictions of a Black woman journalist in popular culture.

By contributing to the representation of Black journalists in popular culture, the novels challenge the dominance of the presumed White "norm" in the Western journalistic field. Instead, they foreground the importance of accounting for the intersection of habitus and doxa in all genres of journalism, underscoring the importance of storytelling generated by

journalists who more accurately reflect the diversity of society and foster genuinely inclusive public discourse. This is crucial not only for the health and advancement of journalism, but also the democratic process.

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