

A Little City with a Big Heart: Localising the Chick-lit Formula in Kate O’Keeffe’s Wellywood Romantic Comedy Series

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Abstract: This article discusses the Wellywood Romantic Comedy series (2015-2016) by New Zealand author Kate O’Keeffe as localized versions of the global chick-lit format. The novels filter prototypical concerns of the genre through a specific cultural nationalist lens and explore questions of national identity through their unique urban setting. I read the novels in the context of the city-branding initiatives aimed at consolidating New Zealand’s capital, Wellington, as a creative city. I also argue that the novels construct their protagonists as prototypical Kiwi heroines who confront their problems displaying prototypical Kiwi values like ingenuity, resourcefulness and pragmatism. Whereas the Wellington setting serves to interrogate the dominance of western chick-lit mega-cities, the discussion of local identity predicaments reveals exciting thematic expansions of the original formula. Yet, the novels’ potential to innovate is limited because both the urban setting and the identity predicaments of the characters reinforce mainstream visions of the city and the country’s hegemonic cultural narratives.

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“New Zealand is a country that constantly tells itself who it is. Every single day there are messages and statements to affirm that this is a great country”
Claudia Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* (1996, 1)

1. Introduction

Since the publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996), generally recognized as the foundational chick-lit novels, the genre has experienced unprecedented global success, received praise as well as criticism, and demonstrated its adaptability and commercial resilience through endless transmutations. All these, in spite of the critical voices which have continued to proclaim its demise (Mißler 12). Chick lit’s renewed energy largely derives from the globalization of the format and its multiple cultural permutations which have, in turn, generated a new wave of scholarship which departs substantially from early discussions of the genre. These studies have focused on exploring the transformations of the format—variously labelled Chica lit, Sistah lit, Desi lit, Koori lit, etc.[1]—and to interrogate its genealogy as entirely rooted in representations of white female concerns exclusively deriving from *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City* (Hurt 2019). Their focus instead has been on the possibilities that chick lit offers to explore the intersections between gender and ethnicity, citizenship, national identity or Indigeneity. In this article I explore some of these topics in relation to a series of novels coming from a context where chick lit and romantic fiction enjoy relatively good health, but which has so far received limited academic attention: Aotearoa New Zealand.

Critical studies of New Zealand chick lit are so far reduced to Phoebe Clay’s MA thesis “New Zealand Pride and Prejudice: Gender and Location in Selected Chick Lit Novels” (2016). Clay demonstrates that, despite their adherence to the conventions of their British and North American counterparts, New Zealand chick-lit novels engage with “mythic conceptions of New Zealand cultural identity” (31), particularly as deriving from their rural and pastoral locations.[2] Clay proves that “the glamorous, fast-paced, and urban lifestyles typical of British and North American texts are collectively rejected in favor of scenic ‘natural’ landscapes and rural communities, often with agricultural ties” (119) because those locations are seen as holding New Zealand’s essence. In this respect, Clay’s analysis is aligned with the more numerous studies on Australian chick lit and popular romance which similarly emphasize their value as a useful tool for discussions of national identity, particularly in relation to place (Flesch 2004; O’Mahony 2015, 2020). Historically, Australian romance authors have favored settings which can be identified as “unmistakably Australian” (Flesch x); and, as O’Mahony argues, Australian rural romances have proved ideal to establish such distinctiveness, to “emphasize the redemptive and purifying qualities of life beyond the city” (2020, 89) and thus to offer “a focused engagement with women’s place in the nation’s culture” (88).

Although chick lit and romantic narratives set in New Zealand clearly favor small town and rural settings, this article focuses on articulations of national identity specifically connected to the city. I explore Kate O’Keeffe’s Wellywood Romantic Comedy[3] Series (2015-2016)—*Styling Wellywood*, *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match* and *Falling for Grace*—set in Wellington, New Zealand’s capital, as a unique variation of the chick-lit format. I read the

series as evidence of the various popular articulations of New Zealand's cultural nationalism in the context of the larger process of national branding guiding governmental policies and private sector initiatives since the late 1990s. As I have argued elsewhere (2021), New Zealand romance authors have capitalized on official branding strategies to create distinctive and appealing settings for their novels, favoring a vision of New Zealand as a rural haven. O'Keeffe's novels channel these branding efforts differently, by focusing on Wellington's urban distinctiveness. Going back to the opening quote, I explore the kind of self-affirming statements that the series contributes to reproducing or enhancing via the city-branding project. This is a topic which has received surprisingly little attention given the quintessential urban nature of the chick-lit genre since its inception. I also ask why the novels' exclusive focus on Pākehā[4] characters is problematic in the light of the country's official bicultural status and its *de facto* multiculturalism,[5] a sociocultural diversity which is specially visible in cities like Wellington, but which the novels nevertheless fail to depict.

2. Branding Wellington as a Chick-lit Capital

Branding has accompanied chick lit since its origins, as evident not only in the actual marketing of the novels, but also in the multiple in-text references to the brands consumed or desired by their protagonists (Mißler 59). A form of branding common to many chick-lit novels, but which has received less critical commentary, is city branding. The glorification of urban life in general and of specific cities in particular is a constant in the plots, even becoming part of the novels' afterlives, as evinced for instance by the offer of tours of Bridget Jones's London or Carrie Bradshaw's New York (Harzewski 97). Megacities like Paris, London or New York, which "boast the free, unobstructed circulation of the top fashion brands, the latest trends, the freest capital flow and global lifestyle, and the most eligible, sexy men and women" (Chen 252) are essential backdrops to narrate the heroine's personal and professional struggles. These chick-lit cities supply the heroines with endless choices, whether in the form of challenging jobs, exciting social life and entertainment, infinite shopping possibilities, and of course romance and sex.

O'Keeffe's series adheres to the original format of these narratives, with its focus on the romantic, sexual and professional quests of white single women in the city and similarly resorts to city branding as a central plot device. Taking the cue from the title of the first book in the series, O'Keeffe styles Wellington as a suitable chick-lit setting, following the advice of one of her characters: "Make it young and chic, like New York, but quintessentially Wellington" (SW 217). At the same time, she renovates the format to create an original product within a highly competitive romance industry, fine-tuning the characteristic "urban sophisticate" (Harzewski 2011, 30-31) associated with the conventional chick-lit megacities. The result is what could be defined as "the small city sophisticate" or the "New Zealand urban chic," a unique urban edge which is perhaps best captured in Lonely Planet's extensively quoted designation of Wellington as one the "[c]ooolest little capitals in the world" (Kenny). O'Keeffe's rendering of New Zealand's capital resizes the conventional chick-lit settings and so interrogates the dominance of western chick-lit mega-cities, like London, Paris or New York. Firmly embedded in the local branding initiatives developed in the country in the last three decades, the novels also showcase New Zealand's unique national identity as located

in its urban centres. Nevertheless, because they present Wellington as a predominantly Pākehā city, the novels end up reiterating the vision of New Zealand as a country where the dominant narratives continue to be white and monocultural, a restrictive depiction to which I return at the end of this section.

Firstly, let us consider how the series articulates its uniqueness via city branding. O’Keeffe starts by discarding assumptions of Wellington as a monotonous and unexciting provincial city and presents it, particularly in the first novel of the series, as a cosy and familiar place, yet thrilling and full of possibilities. *Styling Wellywood* centres on 28-year-old Jessica Banks, who returns to Wellington after four years in London to start her styling business and reconnect with her friends and family. The novel starts portraying Jessica’s discontent with the limitations of her new life; being back in Wellington, she explains, feels like “being forced into penal servitude” (SW 46). The novel opens with a chapter entitled “What Am I Doing Here?” in which Jessica attends a musical at her old high school surrounded by “the same old faces” of her past, as she reflects on her limited professional and personal achievements up to that point:

Had this been a scene in a Nineteenth Century novel I may have swooned gracefully with a sigh, only to be caught by a handsome suitor. We would fall in love and live happily ever after.

Sadly for me, this is Twenty-first Century New Zealand. Unfortunately people don’t go in for that sort of carry-on these days.

So I sit, clutching my bag for support, wondering how I ended up here—living in the very city I fled and vowed never to return to. (SW 3)

Jessica’s thoughts reproduce chick lit’s dual orientation towards “tradition and displacement,” as Harzewski puts it (2006, 29), acknowledging a debt to its nineteenth-century romantic predecessors, but consciously distorting that tradition by transplanting it to its literary and geographical antipodes. Jessica’s words show her reluctance to romanticize Wellington and her disbelief in a “made in New Zealand” happily ever after. Instead, she places all her energies on her business project hoping to bring some of London’s glamour to the city. In this way, O’Keeffe reworks the concerns of the nineteenth-century novel of manners, via the chick-lit template, to discuss the economic and romantic aspirations of contemporary New Zealand women.

The plot unfolds to prove that Jessica’s fairy tale ending depends precisely on her being back in Wellington and on realising the city’s potential, not only in providing her with financial stability once her styling business is consolidated, but also in granting her the true love of the hero. After a failed relationship, Jessica turns to Ben, her best friend, for support. Unlike Jessica, Ben, who has also recently returned from London, is enthusiastic about what the city can offer and tries to persuade her to see Wellington through his eyes:

Wellington rocks! It’s the perfect city with everything you could want in one place and small enough to avoid big city problems, like traffic and pollution. [...] And you have to admit it’s really funky [...]. The murals, the sculpture, the waterfront? The place definitely has a cool, creative vibe to it. [...] You’ll learn to love it, Jess. It might not have the excitement of London, but it’s got its own thing going on. (SW 46-48)

The process of gradually falling in love with Ben runs parallel to that of falling in love with the place. After Jessica finds out her former boyfriend has been cheating on her, she accepts a tour around of the city with Ben and comes to realize that “Wellington can really sparkle” (SW 111)—the chapter is fittingly entitled “Wellywood Baptism.” The scenes showing Jessica and Ben strolling around the city, enjoying its landmarks and unique atmosphere, are reminiscent of iconic tourist campaigns designed to promote Wellington in the last decades. In their analysis of *Have A Love Affair with Wellington* (2006), *Spoil Yourself in Wellington* (2006) and *It’s Never Just a Weekend When It’s in Wellington* (2014), promotional tourist films which follow a heterosexual couple enjoying the city’s attractions from dawn to dusk, Bonelli, Jutel and Leotta argue that they work

as games of seduction where the space of the city reflects, enhances and legitimises the emotional connection between the characters and the world they inhabit. The videos work as cinematic quotations from romantic comedies specifically in their use of montage sequences. They also underline the affective space of the creative city where cultural, social and consumer activities provide both a sense of individuality (the wandering through the streets of the city as a subjective mapping) and the acceptance and facilitation of an urban and communal validation of forms of subjectivity. (41)

This is an apt description of O’Keeffe’s novel. Jessica not only learns to love Wellington, but also manages to map her own individuality and validate her professional and emotional desires in a space which provides her with everything she needs. The novel ends with Jessica and Ben kissing while attending a rugby match, the national sport, at a quintessential Wellington event, the Rugby Sevens Tournament, and with Jessica acknowledging not just her professional and personal success, but “how fantastic it is to here, with Ben, in the city I love” (SW 237). The city then works as a platform and a medium that facilitates the happy resolution of the story proving, as stated in the Tourism New Zealand official website, Wellington’s status as “a little city with a big heart” (Wellington).

Jessica’s concluding remarks reiterate her affectionate connection with a city which has historically struggled to forge its unique identity since it was made the colony’s capital in the mid-nineteenth century. In perpetual competition with Auckland, the largest city in the country with a fast-growing and increasingly multicultural population, Wellingtonians have historically taken pride on the city’s distinctiveness. Such uniqueness was predicated throughout the twentieth century on its role as the administrative and bureaucratic centre, and particularly from the mid-1990s on its renewed profile as the cultural hub of the country, cemented through campaigns like “Absolutely Positive Wellington” (1991), aimed at the city’s reinvigoration after a period of economic decay in the 1980s. In the 2000s, the city’s role as a creative hub was crucially strengthened (Lawn and Beatty 216). Initiatives like the “Creative Wellington Innovation Capital” scheme, developed in 2003 by the Wellington City Council, reinforced its position as the cultural capital of the country, technologically-advanced, with a boosting service sector, and no longer exclusively associated with the rural idiosyncrasy of the country.

The campaigns promoting Wellington as a creative centre were the regional responses to the national branding strategies developed from 1999 onwards by the fifth

Labour government. These national initiatives were designed to increase tourism and trade, to attract foreign investment and skilled labour and to shape a distinctive image of New Zealand internationally (Aronczyk 2). They mostly gravitated around notions of the country as a “clean and green” nation, capitalising on its unspoiled nature and its impressive landscapes. This central message was condensed by the “100% Pure New Zealand” campaign, developed by Tourism New Zealand in 1999, and whose motto is still in use.[6] Despite the emphasis on the rural, cities also became integral to this overarching project, following PM Helen Clark’s proposition to “add smart and innovative to the clean and green image” (quoted in Lawn and Beatty 122) of the country. In this period, the government’s “third way” policies (Lewis, Larner and Le Heron 44; Werry 143; Lawn 23, 178) attempted to reverse the impact of the hard neoliberal policies which had marked the country’s economy since the mid-1980s by aligning neoliberal ideas of economic prosperity with cultural nationalism. This move implied “a recognition of the state’s role in enabling agents into the existing neo-liberal economic order” (Scott and Craig 151), with the market economy seen “not as an end in itself, but as a means to the higher social liberal goal of widening social and economic opportunity and deepening social cohesion” (151). According to the dictates of the knowledge economy, the country’s creative industries—located in cities like Wellington—were crucial because creativity was seen as the perfect link between cultural identity and economic prosperity (Lewis, Larner and Le Heron 44-45). At the same time, and as Jennifer Lawn argues, “[b]y positioning creativity at the intersection of national identity, commerce, the arts, and subjectivity, government policies could knit together globalization and nationalism—discourses that in other contexts run counter to each other” (177). As one character in O’Keeffe’s series puts it very clearly: “[W]e are creating art here. What we do is important creatively, not just to Wellington, to New Zealand, but to the world” (FG 33). Wellington embraced the ideas of the knowledge economy before other New Zealand cities and its status as the cultural centre of New Zealand was cemented around key events, such as the opening of Te Papa (New Zealand’s National Museum) in 1998, the renewal of the Wellington Sea and City Museum or the opening of the city’s Sports Stadium in 1999 (Leotta and O’Regan 4).

O’Keeffe’s series is populated by characters who not only indulge in the creative offer of this renewed city as consumers, but also contribute to enhancing the knowledge economy of the city as *producers*. In their capacity as stylists, designers, actors, or fashion models, they integrate what Richard Florida calls the city’s “creative class” (2002). As in other chick-lit novels, fashion occupies a particularly prominent role. It becomes essential in styling the heroines’ personalities and showcasing their aspirations: Brooke Mortimer, the heroine of *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match*, is described in the book blurb as a business woman, “ready to take the world on stilettos and a power suit” (MP back cover), and uses fashion to project her self-assurance; Grace in *Falling for Grace* is a model and a stylist, but also a designer who dreams of creating her own clothes. But fashion is, most importantly, presented as a key economic sector and source of cultural distinctiveness for the city. *Falling for Grace* opens with a description of Grace modelling at the World of Wearable Arts fashion show, “a wildly popular event, showcasing the weird and the wonderful world of art you can wear” (FG 4). In *Styling Wellywood*, we read about Jessica’s efforts to promote New Zealand fashion labels, mentioned by name throughout the novel, to help “[send] the message Wellington designers are as good as their NYC counterparts. And that the clothes are just as chic” (SW 74). Fashion is thus crucial for the heroines for both personal and professional reasons, and their

engagement with this particular sector attests not only to their individual creativity, but to that of the city and the nation at large.

But if there is a key creative and cultural sector for which Wellington has obtained both international recognition and abundant economic benefits, that is its local film industry. The city consolidated its role as a film-making hub after the success of Peter Jackson's films, which granted it the "Wellywood" nickname borrowed by O'Keeffe to name her series. Designated UNESCO Film City in 2019, Wellington has cemented its profile as "The Film Capital of New Zealand" by specialising in blockbuster production, post-production, digital graphics, animation and digital effects (Leotta and O'Regan 2), mostly thanks to Jackson's own companies: Weta Workshops, Weta Digital and Park Road Post Production (3). The novels variously reflect a dynamic cinematic activity which has become central "not only to the city, but to the NZ government and more broadly NZ's sense of itself" (5). For instance, Jessica and Ben meet to "watch the stars walk the red carpet at The Hobbit [sic] movie premiere" (SW 193); Grace starts dating a well-known Hollywood actor currently filming a successful TV series in the city; and Logan, the hero of *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match*, is obsessed with Tolkien and his world, and visits Hobbiton and the Weta Cave as soon as he arrives in the country, and then takes Brooke to do "a *Middle Earth* tour with him" (MP 228) when they get back together at the end of the novel. In this way the novels, like many branding initiatives in the last years, reinforce the evident connections between tourism, city branding, and the film and fashion industries (Lawn and Beatty 126; Werry 2011), and make these ideal backgrounds for the flourishing of romance.

The characters partake in the national pride deriving from the achievements of the local film industry. At the beginning of the novel, Jessica explains that:

A lot of Wellingtonians refer affectionately to their city as Wellywood, so coined because the famous director, Peter Jackson, lives and works here. Peter Jackson made a few movies in Wellington about little people doing brave things that rather a lot of other people—of varying sizes—seem to like. You might know them: The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit [sic], to name a few.

Wellington has become kind of like New Zealand's answer to Hollywood—without the plethora of movie stars, palm tree lined streets, and people who look like they've walked off the set of Baywatch. (SW 9)

The Wellywood moniker evokes Hollywood as a familiar but nevertheless distant point of reference, proving that the novels move beyond a mere replication of North American settings. Jessica's tongue-in-cheek description of Jackson's movies "about little people doing brave things" resorts to what Shore calls the "strategic deployment of smallness" (6). This conveys the image of New Zealand's as a small nation capable of punching above its weight, of doing great things unassumingly, and of achieving global prominence without renouncing a unique ethos. In fact, and as Jones and Smith argue, Jackson's films are considered as "the poster child for a new kind of New Zealand national identity, one which draws on traditional narratives of low-key but unique national ingenuity, while reworking them in terms of an emerging narrative of creative entrepreneurship" (924).

This unassuming yet robust national character is also reflected in Jessica's descriptions of Wellington's small size. Talking about the likelihood that she will bump into old acquaintances, Jessica reminds her best friend that "our fair country's capital city is just

a big village” (SW 14). Being like a village means, on the one hand, that characters relate to each other in more intimate ways, very differently from what we assume in a large and more impersonal megacity. Thus, O’Keeffe has her protagonists reappearing in the different novels as secondary characters: Jessica and Brooke know each other from school, and the latter makes a brief appearance in *Styling Wellywood*; in *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match* we learn that Brooke’s relationship with her former boyfriend, Scott, came to an end when Scott started dating Jessica, and he appears in both novels. *Falling for Grace* focuses on Brooke’s sister, a model and stylist who ends up working for Jessica, who is also a secondary character in the novel. Although the reappearance of the same characters is a common strategy in romantic series, in these novels this strategy effectively reinforces the idea of community cohesion at the basis of the Wellington brand (Lawn and Beatty 135; Wellington Towards 2040).

The heroines wine and dine in the city’s most popular eateries, they enjoy the city’s reputed coffee culture, its wide cultural offer, they shop in its fashion district, and wear glamorous clothes by local designers to attend social and cultural events which are unique to Wellington, such the World of Wearable Arts gala, the Rugby Sevens tournament, or the world premieres of Jackson’s *The Hobbit*. In this respect, the novels are firmly embedded in the consumerist ethos characteristic of chick lit (Mißler 131-149; Hurt 211-224; Chen 251). But, at the same time, they shift the focus from the prototypical preoccupations of the self-empowered, free, neoliberal female subject and the compulsive forms of consumption and individual gratification which so often determine the lives of chick-lit heroines to a more contained and meaningful project of consumption. In this local version individual pleasure and communal economic benefit are brought to the fore, nationalist pride is enhanced and the narrative of global success and cultural uniqueness defining the city and its creative industries takes precedence over unabashed or careless consumerism.

This optimistic urban narrative of creative success is nevertheless limited to a very specific group of characters. Cultural diversity is notably absent from the series, which is paradoxical given that it is one the main pillars of the city’s branding project (Brunt 41). The characters are, except in a couple of minor cases,^[7] all Pākehā. This unstated whiteness becomes invisible and thus normalized (Hurt 10), with the novels clearly confirming that “[t]he dominant realities of New Zealand life [...] are still those of mainstream Pākehā culture, in which almost every citizen has to participate in order to be educated, secure employment, play sport and engage in most other forms of recreation” (King 513). This homogenous depiction of Wellington is surprising, given New Zealand’s bicultural character and considering that it is in Wellington, the seat of the national government, where “the formal discourse of biculturalism is officially sanctioned and enforced in The Beehive (New Zealand’s parliament)” (Brunt 44). In contrast to “the benign, often affectionate representation of Māori people and culture” in the chick-lit novels discussed by Clay (154), and to the idealized portrayal of New Zealand as a “bicultural utopia” in small-town and rural rugby romances featuring interracial relationships (Fresno-Calleja 2021), the Wellywood series contains virtually no reference to Indigenous Māori culture, places or history.^[8] These omissions contribute to cement visions of the city as monocultural and, even if unconsciously, reiterate long-held stereotypes of Māori as alien to narratives of creativity, entrepreneurship and cosmopolitanism, which is paradoxical, given that Māori people reside mostly in cities and their cultural expressions and creative practices have been crucially transformed and enhanced by their urban experiences.

The absence of diversity is also significant in relation to the large Pasifika and Asian communities who have also made Wellington their home and contributed in evident ways to shape the city's creative character.[9] Although multiculturalism has not been fully implemented politically, the significance of these growing communities has been nevertheless acknowledged and celebrated in various forms. The Wellington City Council, in particular, specifically recognizes the city's diverse communities by supporting their various creative endeavours;[10] Screen Wellington, the city's film office, defines Wellington as "a bicultural City of Film" which works to "elevat[e] and promot[e] Māori stories and storytellers" ("About Wellington"), as well as "to uncover some of the region's diverse storytelling talent" ("Diverse Voices"). Yet, for all the coverage the Wellywood series gives to the city's cultural and social highlights, there are no references to any of the events that serve to showcase the social, cultural or economic contributions of Indigenous or diasporic communities.[11] These omissions confirm Randell-Moon's definition of city branding as "an apparatus of forgetting" (164) which "valoris[es] settler presence as commodifiable and necessary for economic growth" (167) and by extension minimizes the input and significance of minorities. O'Keeffe's series then celebrates Wellington's creativity, but only selectively, prioritising a vision of the city's culture and economy that derives primarily from Pākehā imaginaries. Hers is indeed a unique take, which localizes and rethinks the foundational elements of the chick-lit formula; yet, the novels' restrictive focus curtails the possibility of truly shattering the white foundations of the genre and showcasing Wellington's creative dynamism and cultural diversity in all its forms.

3. Bringing the Formula Home: Kiwi Girls in the City

Chick-lit novels are populated by heroines who embody the "girl next door" figure, relatable characters who display their insecurities openly, and whose competence, as Wells argues, "is always vulnerable to disruption" (53). Their troubles often derive from apprehensions about their physical appearance, their various professional challenges and frustrations and, of course, their troubled relationships with several "Mr Wrongs." The conflicts that O'Keeffe's characters undergo combine the prototypical gender challenges faced by chick-lit heroines with the specific struggles of citizens of a small and remote settler nation engaged in an ongoing and inconclusive process of cultural reaffirmation. In fact, the series rehearses well-known identity concerns that have historically been part of Pākehā literature: the cultural limitations of provincial life, the lure of Europe and North America as cultural centres, the effects of the cultural cringe (a term employed to refer to the sense of cultural inferiority experienced by emerging nations with respect to their former metropolitan centre) and the struggles to articulate a distinctive national identity connected to place. The characters' work and love relationships are animated by these tensions and are eventually solved through a "made in New Zealand" Happily Ever After. This ending comprises both the physical relocation of the couple in the country and the adoption of a lifestyle which relates closely to what are perceived as prototypical Kiwi[12] values. In this section, I discuss how the novels delineate such principles and consider what is problematic about such restrictive articulations of national identity.

If the branding of Wellington serves to position the novels in the global romance market, their engagement with national preoccupations makes them relevant to readers at home. The series thus confirms the “simultaneous national and international orientation” (Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins 1013) of popular romance fiction currently produced in Australia and New Zealand; a duality which has historically characterized romance writing in both countries (O’Mahony 2020, 76). Romance authors in New Zealand have historically been conditioned by the smallness of the local market, which has forced them to write for overseas readers (Sturm 468). As romance author Daphne de Jong reminds us, before the advent of the digital age and self-publishing, many New Zealand authors “were successfully writing romance and ‘women’s books’ for overseas publishers” in various subgenres (5). To access the international market these authors have often had to make concessions, either sacrificing the local content of their works to suit more transnational tastes, or channelling their material through well-known exotic tropes (Sturm 469-70). O’Keeffe’s diverse production evinces these competing demands. The global outlook of her work is evident in the default chick-lit urban settings, like New York, San Francisco or London, she chooses for her most recent novels.[13] Her official website presents her as an international author through the use of the common label of “New York Times Best Selling Author,” locating her in relation to the dominant US romance market. The Wellywood series, by contrast, is set firmly in New Zealand and effectively places Pākehā women on the global chick-lit map by depicting more culturally specific preoccupations which would clearly resonate with her local readers, while still appealing to foreign ones.[14]

Jessica’s transformation from reluctant returnee to successful local businesswoman, her ability to find happiness after her stay in London and to make a living in the fashion sector, but away from the megacities that dominate the market, reinforces the message of the country’s creative potential, despite its smallness. The other two novels in the series provide variations of these themes. *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match* starts where *Styling Wellywood* ends: Brooke’s burgeoning personal growth business, “Live It,” positions her from the start as a woman “on top of [her] game” (MP 5), someone “who knows what she wants and goes out and gets it” (MP 4). Through “Live It,” Brooke helps people “unlock their true potential by showing them how they hold themselves back” (MP 5), while presenting herself in full charge of a perfect life “in one of my favourite cities in the whole world: Wellington, New Zealand’s cool little capital city” (MP 8). Brooke is working to expand her client base to Australia with the help of an American corporate partner who has recently shown an interest in her achievements. Brooke’s business venture, however, fails phenomenally after she is romantically involved with Logan, one of the American businessmen who come to New Zealand, and is tricked into signing a poisoned deal that results in the loss of her client base and the demise of her company. As a result of this unexpected blow, her overconfidence disappears and she starts mortifying herself for being too greedy (MP 173) and for having wrongly assumed that her humble New Zealand company could in any way compete with a powerful American rival (MP 177).

The novel traces Brooke’s transformation after this disappointment into a more down-to-earth and homely type of heroine. Her maturation closely adheres to the conventional story of the chick-lit heroine who “must undergo a process or catastrophe and catharsis from which she emerges triumphant and appropriately humbled” (Mißler 100). But, read through a more culturally specific lens, Brooke’s evolution serves to highlight her ability to recompose her life in the spirit of pragmatism and ingenuity often ascribed to New

Zealanders. Brooke's sense of inferiority with respect to the powerful Americans transpires common self-perceptions of the country's insignificance and fragility, its ongoing "history of seeking external validation" (Bell 19) from bigger nations and "its struggles to maintain its own identity in the face of more powerful allies and neighbors" (Shore 54). The plot then advances to show how Brooke is capable of surviving this setback and continuing with her life. In an exchange with her father, whose approval Brooke fears to have lost, he helps her see the value of her entrepreneurial character and the importance of her achievements, while confirming that he has always felt proud of her:

You built a business so good the only way a big international company could break into the New Zealand market was to take you over in an underhand way. You had the whole country sewn up. [...] You managed to do what most people would give their left arm to do: you found a gap in the market, set up a business, and make a huge success of it. (MP 200-201).

After this motivating conversation, Brooke's transformation continues and is symbolically conveyed through a prototypical makeover scene in which she changes her hair from "unnatural blonde" (MP 204) to natural brunette, "something much closer to the real me" (MP 205). This physical change also brings forth a more relaxed attitude with respect to her expectations: "Life has dealt me a dreadful blow, but I'm ready to start to pick up the pieces and get on with my life" (MP 203). This part of the novel serves to reaffirm Brooke's strength and resilience. In an ironic reversal where she gives herself the advice she cannot longer give to her clients, Brooke resolves to move on: "I'm Brooke Mortimer: I'm tough, I'm driven, and you can bet your life I'm not going to be beaten" (MP 213).

Brooke's transformation can be partly read in the light of Clay's interpretation of New Zealand chick lit as borrowing and transferring some of the values associated with the "Kiwi bloke" figure to the female protagonists. The Kiwi bloke is the male prototype which has dominated cultural representations of the national character, but for which there is no significant female equivalent (Phillips vii; Clay 35). Values like pragmatism, ingenuity (the so-called "DIY attitude") or a "down-to-earth" approach to life, originally ascribed to Pākehā men, are now understood as constitutive of a distinctive national character and, thus, extensive to women. Most of the heroines discussed by Clay in her study live in rural environments and embody such pragmatism and independence. Clay sees these attitudes and values as increasing the readership's rapport with the fictional characters (44); I also read them as an original reshaping of the chick-lit heroine which will appeal to readers outside New Zealand. In this sense, O'Keeffe's heroines occupy a middle-ground: they live in a city which provides them with sufficient doses of glamour and offers more sophisticated work environments than those of their fellow rural heroines; but, behind this chic façade, they are also "Kiwi girls" at heart.

Brooke, then, discards her stilettos to live a simpler life working for her dad and feeling like she is "back in the land of the living" (MP 215), a move that concurs with Clay's idea that these novels "reaffirm and romanticise this impression of NZ women as pragmatic" (72). Once her transformation is completed, and she regains her self-confidence, the love conflict can be successfully solved. At the end of the novel Logan returns to prove his innocence, explains that he has given up his job after finding out about the dishonest behaviour of his business partner, and declares his love to Brooke. The epilogue shows the

couple, now expecting their first baby, moving into a beautiful house overlooking “Wellington’s picturesque harbour” (MP 228). Brooke’s conclusion that “[w]ork doesn’t come first, second, and last in my world anymore” and that “[l]ove [is] all you need” (MP 230), reveals that both Brooke’s and Logan’s original business-oriented minds now shift to what seem to them more genuine and personal preoccupations, as they both abandon their promising international careers for the sake of a more local, humble Kiwi lifestyle. The series champions the creativity, sophistication and entrepreneurial spirit of a city that projects itself outwards, but this outcome is paradoxically inward looking, equating the couple’s happy ending with a quiet and unassuming life in the country.

The last novel in the series, *Falling for Grace*, elaborates on ideas of simplicity and down-to-earthiness through the protagonist’s struggles with fame and public exposure. The novel narrates the life of Grace Mortimer, Brooke’s sister, after she falls in love with famous TV actor Sam Montgomery. Although Grace evolves throughout the novel and becomes more self-confident and self-assertive, she already presents herself from the beginning as the prototypical Kiwi girl. Grace works as an occasional model in a sophisticated and creative environment, but wishes to keep fame at bay and live a quiet life. Her self-effacing character and her simple lifestyle seem incompatible with the complications involved in a relationship with Sam. This conviction is further reinforced when Grace assumes that Sam is romantically attached to co-star Vanessa Hudson, although Sam soon reveals that they have been forced to fake their love under contract for promotional reasons. All these barriers take Grace to express her doubts openly to him: “I’m not a celebrity. And I don’t want to be one, either. I’m a fashion buyer who occasionally models. A girl who’s lived all her life in one place, who’s a nerdy bookworm, who sews her own clothes and loves to watch the History Channel” (FG 102). Her fears are confirmed after they are seen together; Grace resents the unexpected reaction she gets from the media (she is followed by paparazzi and questioned about their relationship on national television). Sam’s prolonged absences from New Zealand and the pressure of keeping their love story secret takes its toll on the relationship and Grace decides to break up with him concluding that she is just “too straightforward, too ordinary” (FG 209) for Sam and she does not want to interfere in his career.

Grace’s transformation, however, revolves around her conviction that, despite these obstacles, she wants to be with Sam. Displaying self-determination and resoluteness, at the end of the novel she travels to LA, finds Sam and declares her love to him. Despite his status as an international film star, Sam comes across as a humble, down-to-earth, and thus suitable partner for Grace, whom he loves precisely for being “real” (FG 146). In fact, early in their relationship he reveals his working class origins to her, his upbringing in a “a council estate in Glasgow” (FG 136) and a life of hard work which, despite appearances, “has hardly been five-star hotels, personal drivers, and red carpets” (FG 136). Thus, the novel discards the image of Sam as an inaccessible and privileged film star and reworks the well-known myth of New Zealand’s egalitarianism to emphasize that Sam and Grace are standing on equal emotional ground. As in the previous two novels, the happy resolution involves his return to New Zealand after Sam officializes their relationship and moves to Wellington. Sam embraces a New Zealand lifestyle, which is still fully compatible with his international career. After all, the couple decides to settle in New Zealand’s film capital, a creative city where Grace can also pursue her own professional ambitions as a fashion designer. The epilogue explains Grace’s determination to make of her hobby her profession, as she enrolls in a fashion design course hoping to integrate the city’s creative class. Grace’s last words prove that this “Made

in New Zealand” *Happily Ever After* does not necessarily mean looking inward, but looking out from her emotionally stable position in a city that caters for all her professional and personal needs. In fact, her last words somewhat amend the ending of the previous novel: “I know deep down, as long as I have Sam, I can take on the world” (FG 232).

The three novels then reflect preoccupations which are traceable in the Pākehā literary canon, such as the lure of Europe and North America as cultural centres, the country’s perennial attempt to overcome its sense of inferiority and its ongoing efforts to establish a locally-grown culture. They all conclude by discarding such historical anxieties and endorsing the confident tone emerging from post-millennial articulations of national identity showcasing New Zealand’s uniqueness. These conflicts are filtered through protagonists whose upbringing and social values allow them to succeed in their business ventures, pursue their various creative aspirations and reconcile their personal needs with their professional goals, overcoming their insecurities and learning from their mistakes. These neat resolutions, however, clearly prioritize mainstream Pākehā narratives and perspectives, conceal contestations of national identity behind the story of success projected globally, and obscure social and economic exclusions within the city and in the country at large.

In her introduction to the edited collection *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* (2019), Erin Hurt denounces the “whitewashing” of the genre, which was characteristic not only of early chick-lit novels but also of the first critical studies, and calls for intersectional critical approaches to a format which can no longer be seen as exclusively associated with the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Admittedly, this task requires not only calling attention to the white-centric focus of previous analyses, but also debating how recent chick-lit novels continue to construct such unproblematized whiteness in various contexts. O’Keeffe’s novels clearly lend themselves to such reading, both in their confident inscription of the Wellington brand (minus its diversity) and in their exclusive focus on Pākehā identity anxieties.

4. Conclusion

This article has discussed the Wellywood romantic comedies series as both reflecting and implementing branding initiatives aimed at consolidating New Zealand’s national character and in particular the capital’s identity as a creative city. The novels grant Wellington a place in an increasingly diverse global chick-lit canon and do so by localizing some of the common topics addressed by the format. Wellington works as a unique and appealing selling point both for outside readers, keen on enjoying romantic narratives from what they might perceive as “exotic” locations, and for local ones who can identify with the characters and relate to their troubles. The novels place the emphasis on creativity as both an economic asset and a source of cultural identity, in line with the policies implemented in the country from the late 1990s onwards and situate the heroines as central to this creative project, not only as consumers but most importantly as producers.

In *Styling Wellywood*, Jessica finds peace of mind, love and professional success at home, so that the novel sends a clear message about New Zealand’s economic and cultural potential. In *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match*, Brooke proves her entrepreneurial skills as well

as her resilience when confronting a more powerful business rival, a blow that proves crucial to her transformation and the happy resolution of her love story with Logan. In *Falling for Grace*, Sam discards a life of pretence and chooses a real life with Grace in a city where they can still pursue their creative goals. The series reinforces the idea that happiness and emotional stability depend on the couples' embracing a simpler and genuine lifestyle without renouncing a global outlook. This is true for New Zealand returnees (like Jessica and Ben), proud city dwellers (like Brooke and Grace) and honorary New Zealanders (like Sam and Logan). Collectively, the novels also provide solutions to identity predicaments that derive from New Zealand's status as a small and remote nation through the portrayal of women who confront their problems displaying prototypical Kiwi values like ingenuity, resourcefulness and pragmatism. Behind this optimistic celebration lies a restrictive construction of a national identity, one which derives primarily from settler myths and mainstream Pākehā values and ideas. The specific image that the novels construct (both for local and foreign readers) responds very clearly to the overarching process of national and city branding, but also fails to portray New Zealand's increasingly diverse and still contested national identity. Hopefully, future chick-lit novels written in the country will come to remediate these representational gaps.

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[1] See, among others, Guerrero (2006), Butler and Desai (2008), O'Mahony (2015), Ommundsen (2011), Ponzanesi (2015), Newns (2018), or Spencer (2018).

[2] Clay's thesis discusses *Divine* (2008) and *Knotted* (2009) by Michelle Holman, *Dinner at Rose's* (2012) and *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast* (2013) by Danielle Hawkins, and *Blackpeak Station* (2013) by Holly Ford. Except for *Knotted*, all the other novels are set in rural locations.

[3] I refer to the novels as chick lit, although O'Keeffe uses the label "romantic comedies." I do not suggest that the two terms are equivalent, but O'Keeffe uses them as synonyms in her website and bionote, where she specifically mentions *Bridget Jones*: "I've loved chick lit and romantic comedies since I first encountered Bridget Jones as a young, impressionable writer. It really was a match made in chick lit heaven" (SW 240).

[4] The term refers to non-Māori New Zealanders of European descent.

[5] From the mid-1980s, New Zealand has implemented a bicultural governance structure directed at cementing the partnership between Indigenous Māori people and non-Indigenous Pākehā as first established in the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document, signed in 1840 by representatives of the Māori tribes and of the British Crown. This bicultural framework, in itself contested for its limitations, remains dominant and has precluded the establishment of a fully developed multicultural policy, although the country's increasing diversity has been recognized and enhanced through various official initiatives.

[6] O'Keeffe does not miss the chance to take the characters out of the city and describes these places in tune with tourist discourses of New Zealand as "100% Pure." Jessica travels to her father's place in Nelson; Brooke and Logan start their relationship while staying in Queenstown, a "stunning" location in the South Island (MP 25); Grace and Sam climb Te Mata Peak from which they contemplate "the broad expanse of the beautiful

pastureland, vineyards, and orchards reaching into the distance” (FG 142). Wellington is thus presented as a gateway to some of New Zealand’s natural wonders, confirming Tourism New Zealand’s description of the city as “surrounded by nature and fuelled by creative energy” (Wellington).

[7] Jia, a woman “of Asian descent” (SW 141) who dates Ben before Jessica and him get together; and Rangi, a dancer who falls in love with Tiffani, one of Grace’s friends, in *Falling for Grace*.

[8] The exception is a brief reference to Jessica and Ben attending a show at Wellington’s Observatory about Matariki, “the constellation indicating the Māori New Year” (SW 09).

[9] According to Statistics NZ, in the 2018 census 74.1% of the population in Wellington identified as Pākehā, 8.6% as Māori, 5.1% as Pacific, 18.3% as Asian, 3% as Middle Eastern/Latin American/African and 1.4% as other ethnicities. See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-place-summaries/wellington-city#ethnicity-culture-and-identity>.

[10] Wellington celebrates, among others, the Japan Festival, Diwali, Africa Day, The Pasifika Festival, Te Wiki of Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Week) or Matariki Puanga. See <https://wellington.govt.nz/news-and-events/events-and-festivals>; and <https://wellington.govt.nz/community-support-and-resources/our-communities/diverse-communities>.

[11] These omissions also apply to other locations. In *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match*, Brooke and Logan visit Arrowtown, a small gold rush town on New Zealand’s South Island. The protagonists walk along the river, wander around the shops and stop for lunch in a cosy restaurant. As part of the couple’s enjoyment of an unproblematized heritage experience, there is also a passing reference to the “Chinese settlement” where Brooke and Logan laugh as they “crouch down to get in and out of the small buildings” (MP 77). This casual reference obliterates the significance of the site, formed by very humble stone dwellings which attest to the harshness endured by the Chinese gold-seekers during this period. The New Zealand Department of Conservation describes it as “a mute reminder and tribute to the contribution made by Chinese goldminers and business people to the region’s gold mining, cultural and business history” (“Arrowtown Chinese Settlement”). This scene is a failed opportunity to reflect on the history of Chinese migration and proves that the series favors Pākehā narratives.

[12] The term “Kiwi” is used as a colloquial version of the term “New Zealander” and has been embraced by New Zealanders of various ethnic backgrounds as a general marker of nationality, although the term is still often equated with the dominant Pākehā identity and their cultural values.

[13] In her more recent literary output, O’Keeffe has prioritized international settings. Besides the Wellywood novels, the other two series set in the country are the *Flirting with Forever* and the *Friends and Forever* series, which take place in Auckland. See <https://kateokeeffe.com/>.

[14] The novels’ paratextual material reveals this international orientation. The back covers assume that the novels will circulate internationally because it encourages prospective readers to “Escape to New Zealand”; *Miss Perfect Meets Her Match* includes a glossary of New Zealand colloquialisms “for those of you who are not from *Godzone*” (MP 231), the term used since colonial times to refer to New Zealand as “God’s Own Country.”

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