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That 90's Kind of Love: the Rise of African American Romance Novels in Traditional Romance Publishing

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THAT 90'S KIND OF LOVE:

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IN TRADITIONAL ROMANCE PUBLISHING

by

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ABSTRACT

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by

Jamee Nicole Pritchard

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Under the Supervision of Professor Christine Evans

In 1994, Pinnacle Books, an imprint of Kensington Publishing Corporation, launched a new line of romance novels that featured Black characters written by Black authors. The new line was called Arabesque, and it was the first of its kind in mainstream publishing dedicated to love stories that explored Black life and culture. The line influenced other publishers to follow suit in acquiring similar titles and authors, and because of the number of African American writers signed to major publishing houses in 1994, the year was deemed by the press as the birth of the African American romance novel. This study examines the significance of African American and Black romance through the perspectives of editors, writers, and readers. From an editorial and industry standpoint, it analyzes romance publishing of the 1980s and 1990s and the elements that potentially influenced Pinnacle Books to invest in an African American readership. The craft of writing Black romances is explored through the motivations and strategies of pioneering Black authors of the genre, and the politics of Black love in romance novels is examined to understand the guiding question of this project: Why do Black women read Black romance fiction?

To my 2001 LCHS Winterguard Squad,

especially Ms. Sequoia Rent,

for igniting my love affair

with romance novels.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Christine Evans, for her editorial feedback, guidance, and constant encouragement through every step of this thesis project. Researching and writing in the midst of a global pandemic was a difficult feat, and she was my guiding light throughout the process. I thank archivist Steve Ammidown for the time and energy he spent identifying and scanning relevant archival material for me from the unprocessed depths of Bowling Green State University's Browne Popular Culture Library. Hopefully one day I'll be able to visit the library and its impressive romance collection in person. Thank you to Joe Austin for fostering and encouraging my initial interest in studying romance novels, and lastly, thank you to my mother, L'Tanya Pritchard, who continues to be my sounding board for all my works-in-progress.

Introduction

In December 2019, Romance Writers of America (RWA), the official trade organization of romance writers, imploded because of members' claims of racism and bias.[1] The annual conference was cancelled, members resigned, and chapters across the country disbanded. Across social media platforms, writers of color expressed their disappointment and anger for an organization that has failed on several occasions to support inclusivity across racial and ethnic lines. Many of these writers discussed creating a new organization but saw the futility in the effort because of a lack of resources. Others pointed to a larger irony: the organization now under fire for exclusionary practices had been founded by Vivian Stephens, a prominent African American editor who worked for both Dell Publishing and Harlequin. Alyssa Cole, a romance writer said, "I keep thinking how very American this RWA situation is. The organization was started by a Black woman and now bigots get to keep the infrastructure she and many other marginalized authors built, the money and connections, while we're forced to start from scratch somewhere else."[2] Stephens was an advocate for the inclusion of minority writers in the romance industry. The mission of RWA was to professionalize romance writers through networking, advocacy, and increasing public awareness of the romance genre. While the early years of the

[1] Chinese American romance author Courtney Milan called out racist stereotypes of Asian women in a white author's novel. Because the discussion of the author and the novel took place on Twitter, the white author filed an ethics complaint citing bullying and damage to business prospects because of Milan's social media reach. The RWA sided against Milan, suspending her RWA membership for a year and banning her from future leadership positions. In support of Milan, nine members of the board resigned, including eight women of color, and major publishers pulled their sponsorship from the annual conference.

[2] Aja Romano and Constance Grady, "Romance is publishing's most lucrative genre. Its biggest community of writers is imploding," *Vox*, January 10, 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/1/10/21055125/rwa-what-happened-resignations-courtney-milan-damon-suede-backstory-2020-ritas-conference.

organization may have been inclusive to writers of color, the organization now mirrors the structure of the overall demographics of the publishing industry.

As of 2019, the industry is majority white, heterosexual, non-disabled, cisgender, and female.[3] This breakdown includes the executive level, editorial, sales, marketing and publicity, book reviewers, literary agents, and even interns.[4] Romance accounts for one third of the publishing market, yet for every 100 books published by the leading romance publishers in 2020, only twelve books were written by people of color.[5] The average for the past four years ranges from six to eight books. In response to the racial and ethnic diversity gap in romance publishing, writers of color have turned to self-publishing and independent presses for visibility within the market. The exposure of RWA's racist structure in 2020 along with the Black Lives Matter Movement that summer, created widespread interest in Black romance fiction. Along with books about anti-racism, white Americans purchased books about the Black experience in America. Black readers, book reviewers, and writers of romance curated lists of novels, across all the subgenres of romance, so that white readers could also explore Black love and joy alongside Black trauma and pain.

The summer of 2020 was also when scholars and archivists began documenting the history of Black romance. The *Black Romance Podcast* created by Dr. Julie Moody-Freeman, and funded in part by a grant from RWA, is an oral history project that documents and preserves

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[3] Lee and Low Books, "Where is the diversity in Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results," accessed March 22, 2020, https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/.
[4] Ibid.
[5] The Ripped Bodice, "The State of Racial Diversity in Romance Publishing, 2020," accessed March 5, 2021, https://www.therippedbodicela.com/sites/therippedbodicela.d7.indiebound.com/files/2020%20Diversity%20Report%20MASTER.pdf.

conversations with Black writers, editors, and scholars of historical and contemporary popular romance fiction.[6] Archivist Steve Ammidown actively documented Black romance history through his use of social media during the summer of 2020 and has recently created a blog called *Romance Fiction Has a History* that includes a working timeline of Black romance as well as articles about pioneering Black romance writers in the industry.[7] He pulls directly from the archives of Bowling Green State University's Browne Popular Culture Library, the official repository for Romance Writers of America.[8] Also, within the past year, and amid the stay-at-home orders of the COVID-19 pandemic, more organizations, writers, and community groups created virtual webinars, book clubs, and author events that celebrated Black genre romance and its writers.

For example, during Juneteenth, Black writers across a variety of genres participated in the Juneteenth Book Festival. Panel discussions celebrated the art of Black American storytelling and literature and were streamed via YouTube. Romance authors Beverly Jenkins, Rebekah Weatherspoon, Alyssa Cole, and Farrah Rochon discussed their experiences writing Black romance.[9] I was invited to moderate a Black romance history panel at RWA's virtual summer conference in 2020. The panel included trailblazing authors Sandra Kitt, Donna Hill, and Shirley Hailstock who discussed the romance industry of the 1980s and 1990s. Several

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[6] Julie Moody-Freeman, "Black Romance Podcast," accessed March 30, 2021, https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/.
[7] Steven Ammidown, "A Black Romance Timeline," *Romance Fiction Has a History* (blog), February 16, 2021, https://romancehistory.com/2021/02/16/a-black-romance-timeline/.
[8] "PCL MS 142 Romance Writers of America Archives," Browne Popular Culture Library Manuscripts (BGSU University Libraries), accessed March 30, 2021, https://lib.bgsu.edu/finding_aids/items/show/2589.
[9] *Juneteenth Book Fest - Black Love: Writing Black Romance*, (YouTube, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hd35oBcd-G4.

authors also participated in virtual book fairs like the Harlem Book Fair and author events presented by local libraries and book clubs. The use of Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms aided in connecting new and old readers of the genre. While the idea for my study occurred before the summer of 2020, the hypervisibility of the institutional and systemic racism in American society during the time created an environment that welcomed my research and my desire to continue the documentation of Black women in romance publishing.

As I have discovered, however, documenting the history of Black romance is a difficult feat. No comprehensive text exists that chronicles the genre's history. Most of the documentation that explores the genre are clips from newspaper and magazine articles, digitized author interviews from YouTube, writing manuals authored by African American writers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and one-off chapters that briefly discuss the rise of multicultural romance, lumping together all novels written by, about, and for people of color. Through my research, I have discovered that whiteness is the default in the history of popular romance. Therefore, the documentation of Black romance history serves as a force against the theoretical concept of symbolic annihilation. This is a term first used by media studies scholars to describe the ways in which mainstream media ignore, misrepresent, or malign minoritized groups. It has since been used to describe how marginalized groups are misrepresented or absent in a variety of symbolic contexts.[10] I use the term in the context of the silences written into the historical record of popular romance that ignore the history of Black women, and other women of color, in the romance genre.

[10] Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives1," *The American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): pp. 56-81, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56, 57-58.

In my documentation of Black romance history, I consider why the genre was developed, the structure and content of Black romance novels, the motivations of Black romance writers, and the desires and literary fantasies of their Black readership. I separated my study into three chapters to effectively analyze the perspectives of editors, writers, and readers. The first chapter explores the birth of the African American romance novel in 1994 through the launch of Pinnacle Books' Arabesque line, category romance novels written by Black authors with Black characters. In the second chapter, I focus on Black romance authors and their motivations for writing fiction for a predominantly African American readership. Lastly, in the third chapter, I explore the politics of Black love to understand the desires, fantasies, and expectations of a Black romance readership. My aim in this study is not to compare Black romance to its white counterpart, as I believe Black women's history, sexual politics, and gender ideology complicate the idea of romance and love relationships for Black readers and writers. For this reason, Black romance does not fit into the traditional structure of white romance, and the constant comparison of Blackness to the norms of whiteness creates limitations in the exploration of Black culture. Instead, I explore Black love within the context of the Black imagination where Blackness is centered, and Black writers have the power to build entire worlds in exploration of Black life.

Black romance is important in understanding Black women's joy in a genre that allows women to explicitly center and explore their own pleasure in a manner that re-envisions their sexuality. Contemporary Black romance of the 1990s portrayed Black people of the middle-class and was written using an optimistic literary aesthetic typical of popular romance. These novels were distinctly different from African American urban fiction and literary fiction that often centered Black experiences of trauma and pain. In 1994, editor Vivian Stephens described the abundance of Black romances in the era as "the first time that African-American women have

been able to write and read something completely frivolous."[11] Stephens' description may seem like a devaluation of the genre, but in the context of Black romance, and Black women's relationship with their sexuality, I think this frivolity highlights the importance of the genre to Black women. Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers asserts that, "The ability to speak, to imagine, to desire freely without fear of punishment or censure marks both privilege and autonomy."[12] Black romance allows its readers and writers the privilege of fantasy unmarked by trauma. For Black women to have the opportunity to participate in frivolity, as Stephens notes, is an exercise of resistance that marks the significance of Black romance novels.

As LaKisha Simmons notes in her research of Black girlhood in New Orleans from 1930 to 1954, the consumption of romance fiction by Black girls and women created autonomous spaces where they could connect with one another through shared experiences and desires. She describes these spaces as pleasure cultures, formed in and around joy. In exploring the popular writing and reading culture of Black teenage girls, Simmons analyzes their creation and consumption of pleasure, fantasy, and romance. "By sharing and discussing these narratives with one another and even by writing their own stories," she writes, "Black girls constructed and imagined romantic subjectivities in opposition to their daily encounters with Jim Crow and to restrictive notions of black womanhood. These writings also disrupted the silence on black female pleasure."[13] In essence, young Black girls were redefining their girlhood amid the pervasive controlling images in a racist society through their participation and consumption of

[11] Deborah Bradley. "Matchmaking: Black Writers Find an Audience for Black Romance Novels." *The Crisis* 101, no. 8 (1994): 34.
[12] Quoted by Lakisha Michelle Simmons, "Make-Believe Land: Pleasure in Black Girls' Lives," in *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 177.
[13] Ibid., 180.

popular romance. I believe the same can be said for communities of Black women romance readers in the 1990s.

The most cited scholarship on romance readership is from Janice Radway, Tania Modleski, and Jayne Ann Krentz. Their books were published between 1982 and 1992 and do not consider issues of race within the content and structure of romances or in its readership. Although this scholarship pre-dates the official birth of the African American romance novel in 1994, Black readers were approximately twenty-five percent of overall romance readership during the time that this scholarship was published. Although Radway does discuss the limitations of such a narrowly focused study, she, Modleski, and Krentz group together romance readers, no matter race, under the same category of woman without acknowledging that the reader's race may contribute to a significant difference in her reading experience and relationship with genre romance. Catherine Regis, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel,* chronicles the genre's history from the 17th to the 20th centuries without mention of Black romance or even multicultural romance despite its publication date of 2003, almost ten years after the birth of African American romance. Although John Markert, in *Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry, 1940s to the Present,* does include a brief section that chronicles Black, multicultural, and interracial romance, it is merely a starting point for research into Black romance history. Romance is shaped by its whiteness, and the scholarship proves this point.

Much of the scholarship that directly examines Black romance is written by scholars of English literature, who often limit their investigation of Black romance by examining it only within certain frameworks, for example, Black romance's place within the canon of African American fiction, its use for the articulation of Black women's sexuality, and its representations of racial uplift and activism. In "Flipping the Script: Romancing Zane's Urban Erotica,"

Consuela Francis analyzes Black erotic romances to understand the depiction of pleasurable sexuality outside of the restrictions of Black women's respectability. Julie Moody-Freeman, in "Scripting Black Love in the 1990s: Pleasure, Respectability, and Responsibility in an Era of HIV/AIDS," explores romance novels from author Brenda Jackson and her depictions of safe sex among Black couples. She asserts that Jackson's scripting of Black sexual politics, love, and pleasure subvert popular culture stereotypes of Black people as hypersexual, irresponsible, and deviant. Rita Dandridge, in *Black Women's Activism: Reading African American Women's Historical Romances*, explores Black historical romances between 1989 and 2004 and discusses the resistance of Black heroines at particular moments of history. Her examination of these historical romances explores gender issues that have been previously unexplored in Black fiction and emphasizes the agency of Black women throughout history.

While these works are important in understanding how romance novels are useful tools in the exploration of Black women's studies, my goal in this study is to examine the history of Black romance within the much broader context of the era in which the genre was defined, began to reach a mass audience, and became a subject of significant public debate both within and beyond the romance industry. How did Black writers incorporate the social issues of the 1990s and early 2000s into their work? How did the prevalence of Black culture in television, movies, music, and literature affect the growth of Black romance publishing? How were Black romance novels marketed? What clubs, groups, and events were formed in celebration of Black romance? Most importantly, what is the legacy of early Black romance and its pioneering authors? Ann Yvonne White, in her 2008 dissertation, *Genesis Press: Cultural Representation and the Production of African American Romance Novels*, answers some of these questions, but her focus is on the Black-owned independent publishing company Genesis Press. I build on and

extend White's work by focusing primarily on mainstream Black romance novels published by major romance publishing houses.

It is important to note that my research is limited to the examination of heterosexual and cis-gender romance, as this was the prevailing representation of love in mainstream romance fiction at the time. The inclusion of Black queer romance is essential to a full-bodied examination of romance as is the history of self-published and independently published romance novels by Black authors. Just as the traditional narrative of romance history is shaped by its whiteness and heterosexuality, I do not wish to shape the dominant narrative of Black romance using similar benchmarks. Romance history is expansive and much of it is still unexplored. This study reflects the importance of the documentation of romance history from the perspective of Black women in the industry as editors, writers, and readers. While my research is just a small part of the overall history of the genre, I hope that it disrupts the single-story narrative of who is allowed to desire and be desired.

Chapter One
Pinnacle Books and the Birth of the African American Romance Novel

In 1994, Pinnacle Books, an imprint of Kensington Publishing Corporation, launched a new line of category romance novels that featured Black characters written by Black authors.[14] The new line was called Arabesque, and it was the first of its kind in mainstream publishing dedicated to African American love stories. The success of the line influenced other publishers to follow suit in playing to the interests of African American romance readers, and because of the number of Black authors signed to major publishing houses during the summer of 1994, it was deemed by the press as the birth of the African American romance novel.[15] Describing the imprint's motivation for publishing Black romance, Walter Zacharius, the Chairman of the Board of Kensington Publishing Corporation, said: "The Arabesque line carries on the tradition of Pinnacle Books as an innovator and trendsetter in the industry. We're proud to be out in the marketplace first with a line of romances featuring African Americans. While other publishers are still talking about such projects, we went out and did it."[16]

The origin story of Arabesque is that Zacharius noticed that many Black women were buying romance novels during his visits to bookstores and mass merchandisers, yet there were no books pinpointed to them.[17] He saw an overlooked publishing niche and decided to create a product for a market of African American readers. He hired Monica Harris in 1993, an African

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[14] According to Romance Writers of America, category romance is defined as "books issued under a common imprint/series name that are usually numbered sequentially and released at regular intervals, usually monthly, with the same number of releases each time.

[15] Deborah Bradley, "Matchmaking: Black writers find an audience for Black romance novels," *The Crisis* 101, no. 8 (November 1994): 34.

[16]"Introducing Arabesque: a ground-breaking publishing program from Pinnacle Books, "*Romantic Times Magazine* July 1994, 14-15.

[17] Eleena de Lisser, "Romance Books Get Novel Twist and Go Ethnic," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 1994.

American editor who became the spokesperson for the Arabesque line. Within weeks of her joining the company, she had purchased the first two titles in the Arabesque program, *Serenade* by Sandra Kitt and *Forever Yours* by Francis Ray (see Figures 1 and 2).[18]

As Zacharius described, Pinnacle Books was a trendsetter in the 1990's romance industry. In the same year that it launched Arabesque, it introduced another category line called *A Man's Touch*, the first dedicated line of romances written from a man's point of view.[19] Another imprint of Kensington Publishing, Zebra Books, introduced a line called *To Love Again* in 1992. It was the first line of romances that featured female protagonists that were divorced, widowed, or supplanted by younger women. These protagonists dealt with "underachieving adult children, suffer[ed] breast cancer and doubt[ed] their ability ever again to engage in meaningful sexual relations."[20] Kensington Publishing's imprints were not afraid to shift away from the tried-and-true formula of the romance novel. Sandra Kitt, the author that launched Arabesque, noted that major romance publishers knew that they had a significant portion of non-white readers in their audience but "as long as Blacks were willing to buy romances with white characters, why fool around with the formula?"[21]

But was Black category romance simply a trend set by an innovative publishing company? Romance publishing is known for its subgenres and its ability to reach diverse markets of readers. While Pinnacle Books may have been the first major publisher to create a specific subgenre that connected with a niche market of readers, I think the reasoning behind

[18] "Introducing Arabesque," 14.
[19] Ellen Alperstein, "Romance Novels Embrace Diversity: Books: Think bodice rippers are only about the young? Think again. New stories cater to multicultural and mature love," *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 1994
[20] Ibid.
[21] De Lisser, "Romance Books Get Novel Twist And Go Ethnic."

their decision is much more calculated. Arabesque was implemented with the idea of attracting a dedicated and long-term following of romance readers. In this chapter, I examine the history of romance publishing to understand the factors that led to the birth of the African American romance novel in 1994. Arabesque was not the first instance of Black romance in mainstream publishing. Ten years prior, Dell Candlelight published a series of ethnic romances that did not find the same success as the Arabesque line. Why?

To answer these questions, I examine niche marketing in romance publishing from the 1970s to the 1990s, contextualizing it within the narrowcasting of the Fox network in the 1990s in its targeting of African Americans. The popularity of Black romance novels occurred simultaneously with the rise of Black television shows from the trendsetting network. Many of these shows, particularly those featuring Black women, followed the formula of the successful novel *Waiting to Exhale*, published in 1992, by African American writer Terry McMillan (see Figures 3 and 4). This novel also influenced Black romance in the 1990s. Through my exploration of Black romance, I argue that the genre was more than a trend but a culmination of several key factors within romance publishing. Black romance novels found acclaim in the mid-1990s because Pinnacle Books, in creating a dedicated category romance line, prioritized the desires of African American readers. I further argue that the influence of Black editors, authors, and independent Black publishers paved a way for African American romance in mainstream romance publishing.

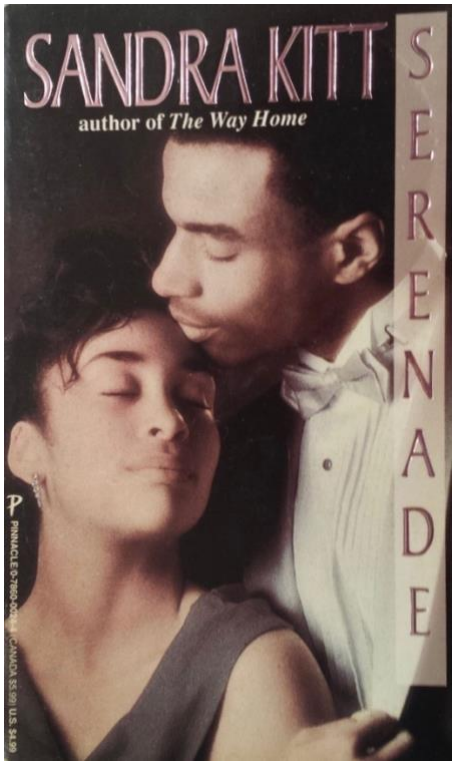

Figure 1. Sandra Kitt, *Serenade* (Pinnacle Books, 1994)

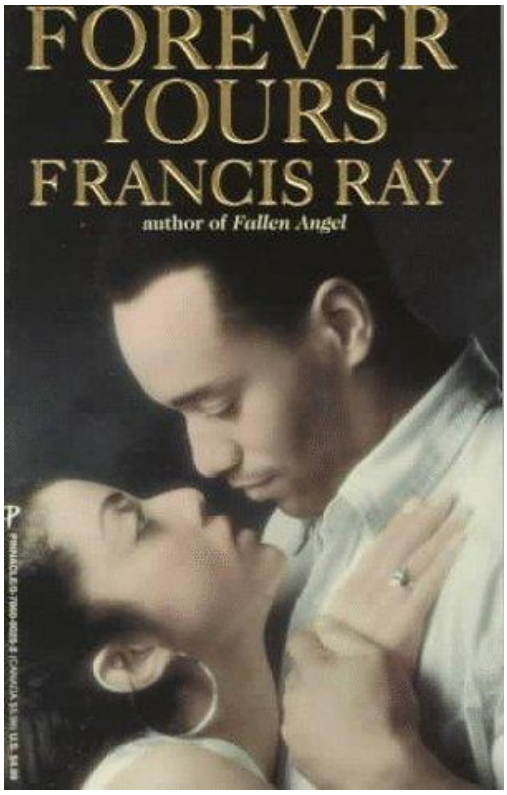

Figure 2. Francis Ray, *Forever Yours* (Pinnacle Books, 1994)

Figure 3. Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* (Pocket Books, 1992)

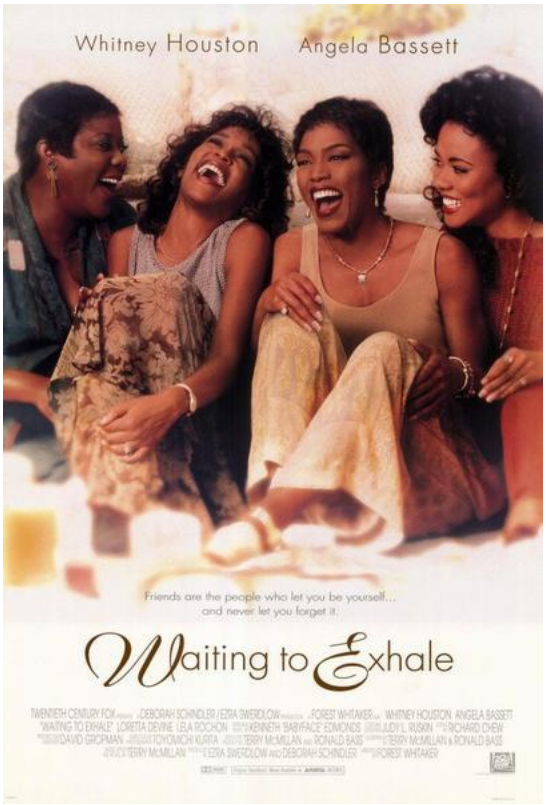

Figure 4. *Waiting to Exhale*, Motion Picture (Twentieth Century Fox, 1995)
Left to Right: Loretta Devine, Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Lela Rochon

Before Arabesque:
Ethnic Romances of the 1980s and Black Indie Presses of the Early 1990s

The summer of 1994 was not the first instance of Black love on the shelves. Dell Candlelight published the first mainstream African American category romance novel, *Entwined Destinies* by Elsie B. Washington, under the pseudonym Rosalind Welles, in 1980 as part of a new program that was designed to reach a new audience (see Figure 5). It was introduced by Dell as the "first ethnic Candlelight Romance"[22] and described by *People Magazine* as the "desegregation of the paperback romance novel."[23] In an announcement introducing the line, the publisher states: "By adding ethnic romance to our Contemporary Candlelight line, we will reach a wide, previously untapped market of readers of various ethnic backgrounds. It's a whole new concept in paperback romance publishing!"[24]

The line was edited by Vivian Stephens, a prominent African American romance editor in the industry, and it included four more ethnic romances: *Golden Fire, Silver Ice* (1981) by Marisa de Zavala, a Mexican American author, *Web of Desire* (1981) by Jean Hager, an American Indian author, and *The Tender Mending* (1982) by Lia Sanders, a pseudonym for two African American authors, Angela Jackson and Sandra Jackson-Opoku (see Figure 6). These ethnic romances, unlike Arabesque novels, were merged into Dell's Candlelight Ecstasy Romance contemporary line of category romances that featured predominantly white characters. Dell ceased its publication of ethnic romances in its Ecstasy line just two years later, in 1982. Stephens departed Dell for Harlequin in the same year. As an editor at Harlequin, she was in charge of launching its American Romance line, category romances similar to Dell's Ecstasy

[22] "The First Ethnic Candlelight Romance!" Dell Candlelight Romances, June 1980.
[23] Review, *Entwined Destinies, People Magazine,* 1980.
[24] Ibid.

line. Although she wanted to publish novels written by Black authors with Black characters, she was not receiving any submissions that fit the line's criteria at the time. Therefore, she asked Jackie Weger, a white author, to make her white characters Black, and, with her editorial assistance in creating believable Black characters, *A Strong and Tender Thread* was published in 1983 (see Figure 7).[25] Two years later, Sandra Kitt signed to Harlequin as its first Black author and published *Adam and Eva* in 1985 (see Figure 8).

Why were these first Black romances relatively limited in their impact in the 1980s? The perceived lack of crossover appeal of African American romance was a major issue for mainstream publishers like Dell and Harlequin. When Black writers did submit manuscripts that portrayed characters with differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they received pushback from white editors, claiming that white readers were unable to connect with non-white characters. Gwynne Forster, one of the authors in the Arabesque program, said:

> Prior to [1994] there were not any African American romance novels being published, and it isn't just that there were none, but when writers presented a book to the editors in these publishing houses, they would say, 'Okay, it's a nice story, can you change the characters to white?' [or] 'I can't sell that, no one's going to read it.' That didn't have any meaning for Walter Zacharius, and one of the reasons that I admire him so greatly is that he went against the tide…Now every publisher wants African American authors and stories with African American characters.[26]

According to Kitt, when Stephens bought the manuscript for her novel *Adam and Eva*, Canadian executives at Harlequin saw it as an unwise move that would alienate their white readers.[27]

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[25] John Markert, *Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry, 1940s to the Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), Location 4737.
[26] "Romance author Gwynne Forster tells how she got started," YouTube video, 3:43, "AALBC.com," October 27, 2007,https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZOz61JpvIg&list=PLoFDjxRc7xwjAFsJm7CwY6zSHrFQVCCLZ&index=23.
[27] "A Critical Discussion on the History of Black Category Romance," Panel Discussion for Romance Writers of America, August 2020.

Stephens, however, stood her ground and published Kitt's novel. Kitt says she received only four negative letters from readers in response to her ethnic romance.[28] There is no documentation to note whether Stephens received the same pushback from Canadian executives about Weger's novel, even though it too depicted Black characters. What is noted, however, is Stephens' power as an editorial gatekeeper and her role in establishing an early subgenre of Black and multicultural romance.

Ultimately, I think the limited impact of the ethnic romances of the 1980s was due to publishers' worries about crossover appeal. The novels were merged into category romance lines that already had a dedicated market of readers, and there was no potential, or desire on the part of the publisher, to disrupt a proven and profitable market. During a 2003 roundtable discussion with publishing professionals who specialized in books by and about African Americans, Denise Stinson, the founder of Walk Worthy Press, a Black-owned independent publisher of Black Christian fiction said, "I think there's a danger in trying to market a book as a crossover book. You'll fall through the cracks. No one will know who this book is for. I think you have to identify your market and go after it."[29] Early ethnic romances from Dell and Harlequin fell through the cracks because of an undefined market.

Black-owned independent publishers, in contrast, were committed to marketing to Black readers without worrying about the crossover appeal of their novels to white readers. They also increasingly sought to publish Black romances in the years before 1994. In 1990, Leticia Peoples established her Maryland-based publishing company called Odyssey Books where many Black

[28] Ibid.
[29] Calvin Reid and Charlotte Abbott, "Talkin' About Black Books," *Publishers Weekly*, December 8, 2003, pp. 24-30, 28.

romance authors got their start in the industry. Donna Hill launched Odyssey Books with her contemporary romance *Rooms of the Heart* along with Mildred Riley's historical romance *Yamilla*. Both authors went on to write for Arabesque. Hill said:

> "When *Rooms of the Heart* was published, I was ecstatic, and I thought by book was going to be everywhere [but] we had a warehouse full of ten thousand copies of the book with nowhere to put it because bookstores did not think that the book would sell. They didn't really even know what it was because it was still 1990. Sandra [Kitt] came out with her first African American romance [*Adam and Eva*] years before [1985], and there was this big gap in between. [Odyssey Books] was a small, Black, independent publisher – not Harlequin or Simon & Schuster. There was no distributor.[30]

Hill emphasized that, unable to rely on a major publisher's distribution, she had to find booksellers to carry her novel herself:

> Back then, I literally became what many self-published authors were. I started making lists of all of the Black-owned bookstores in New York, and I went to the libraries; I sent out letters. I went, literally, peddling my book. I would go to these Black bookstores, and it was so strange because they were like, 'Well, where do we even put it?' There was no Black romance section in any bookstore anywhere. They had no idea where these books were even supposed to go. So, they took books on consignment from me… And that's how we began…Leticia Peoples was so committed to what she was doing, she would pay us out of her pocket for royalties."[31]

Hill published one more book with Odyssey Books in 1991, *Indiscretions*, but on her third book, Peoples advised her to talk to Monica Harris at Pinnacle Books because, financially, she could no longer hold onto the company.[32]

Another small indie press included Los Angeles-based Holloway House Publishing, the self-proclaimed "world's largest publisher of Black experience paperbacks."[33] In the 1980s, the publisher was best known for its urban fiction paperbacks by Donald Goines that chronicled the

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[30] "A Critical Discussion on the History of Black Category Romance," Panel Discussion for Romance Writers of America, August 2020.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Stephanie Carol Burley, "Hearts of Darkness: The Racial Politics of Popular Romance" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2003), 128.

difficulties of growing up in the dangerous world of drugs and prostitution. They created a line of romances in 1983 called Heartline Romances that was short-lived because of "the difficulty of translating the 'realistic and gritty' style of Holloway's trademark novels into a romantic aesthetic appropriate to paperback romance" (see Figure 9).[34] This optimistic aesthetic of paperback romance is integral to the genre's appeal to its readers. In acquiring manuscripts from Black writers in the 1980s, Stephens explained that she had trouble finding appropriate ones because they were "so filled with misery and unhappiness that they [were] totally inappropriate for the genre."[35] As a response, she, along with other Black editors of major publishing companies established writing workshops to offer aspiring African American authors guidance in writing romance novels as well as guidance on entering the romance industry. Stephens was a proponent for professionalizing African American authors, and to do so, she co-founded Romance Writers of America in 1981, an association of authors designed to foster professional development among women in the industry. She also established the Women Writers of Color group, where she served as a mentor to African American authors, giving them advice on how to market their work to mainstream publishers.[36]

Unlike Dell and Harlequin, Pinnacle Books was not concerned with crossover appeal and followed the lead of Black independent publishers in marketing solely to Black readers. This is the difference between the 1980's ethnic romances and the Black romances that launched in 1994. The success of Black indie romance novels proved that Black readers wanted a genre of their own. Susan Ostrov Weisser asks: "[W]hy offer 'your own' rather than simply publish authors of varied backgrounds and colors within the same imprints, featuring stories about lovers

[34] Ibid., 129.
[35] Bray, "Love For Sale, 72.
[36] Burley, "Hearts of Darkness," 131.

of similarly varied backgrounds and colors?"[37] She explains that labeling a line of romances as African American is not likely to increase white readership of that imprint because the line is seen as separate and exclusive to one audience. I argue that this idea was key to Pinnacle Books' marketing strategy.

As the first mainstream publisher to market exclusively to a Black readership instead of publishing Black love stories within the same imprints as white love stories, Pinnacle Books monopolized the Black dollar in romance publishing by giving Black readers the type of romances they wanted. The motivation in creating Arabesque was to show Black readers that they were a major audience for Pinnacle Books instead of one that was secondary to white readers. Weisser writes that "many Black readers enjoy *their own* romances because they do want them to be distinct from the mainstream form of the genre."[38] Black romance, though written in a similar style as white romances, reflected diverse Black cultures and communities, therefore, its distinction from category romances that depicted white characters was crucial. As many authors of the genre proved, Black romance was more than love stories that were tinted brown.

As publishers saw with Black readers' reception of the 1992 best-selling novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, Black readers would support a product produced by and for their community. In describing the impact of a line like Arabesque, Monica Harris, its editor, said it would bring those readers, presumably Black readers, looking for distinction back to the bookstores.[39] In essence, Pinnacle Books' bottom line was very similar to Stephens' vision of Dell Candlelight's

[37] Weisser, *The Glass Slipper*, 153.
[38] Ibid.
[39] "Introducing Arabesque…a groundbreaking publishing program from Pinnacle Books!" *Romantic Times*, July 1994, 15.

ethnic romances in 1980 – to reach a wide, previously untapped market of readers. This cycle of reaching untapped markets of readers is not new to romance publishing. Finding new markets was essential to selling more books, and niche marketing is the at the core of the romance industry's success.

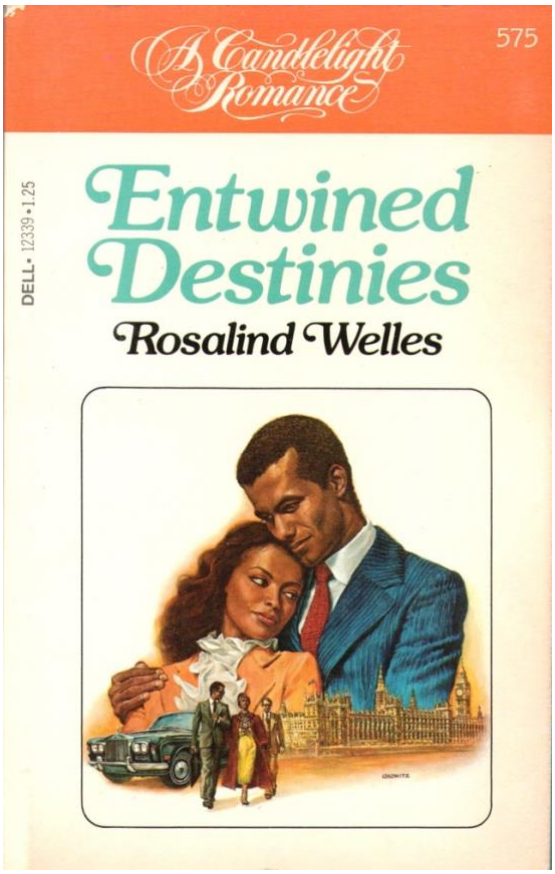

Figure 5. Rosalind Welles [Elsie Washington], *Entwined Destinies* (Dell Publishing, 1980)

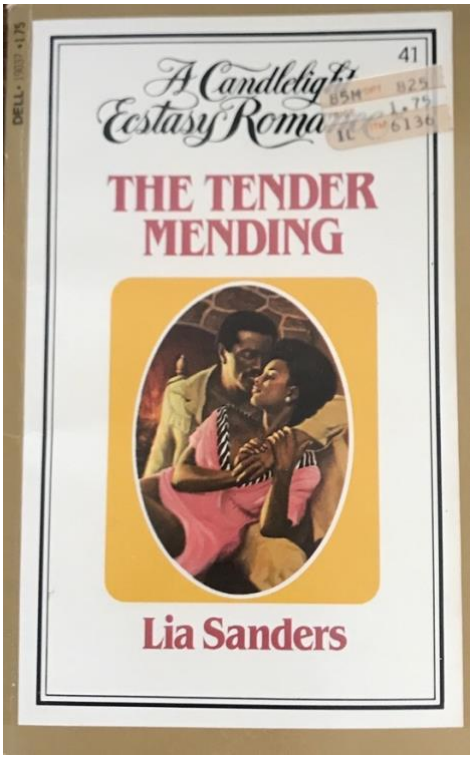

Figure 6. Lia Sanders [Angela Jackson and Sandra Jackson-Opoku], *The Tender Mending* (Dell Publishing, 1982)

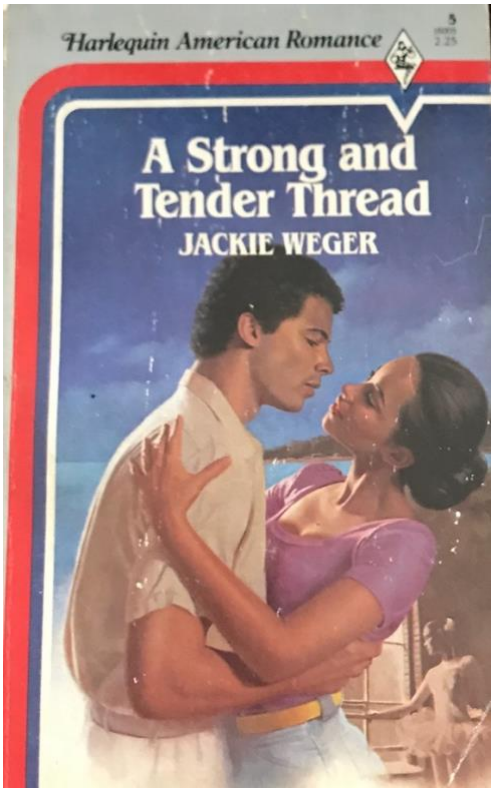

Figure 7. Jackie Weger, *A Strong and Tender Thread* (Harlequin Books, 1983)

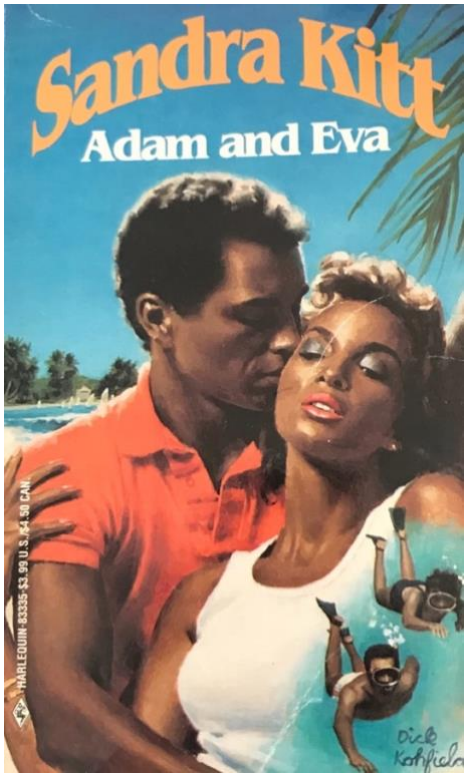

Figure 8. Sandra Kitt, *Adam and Eva* (Harlequin Books, 1985)

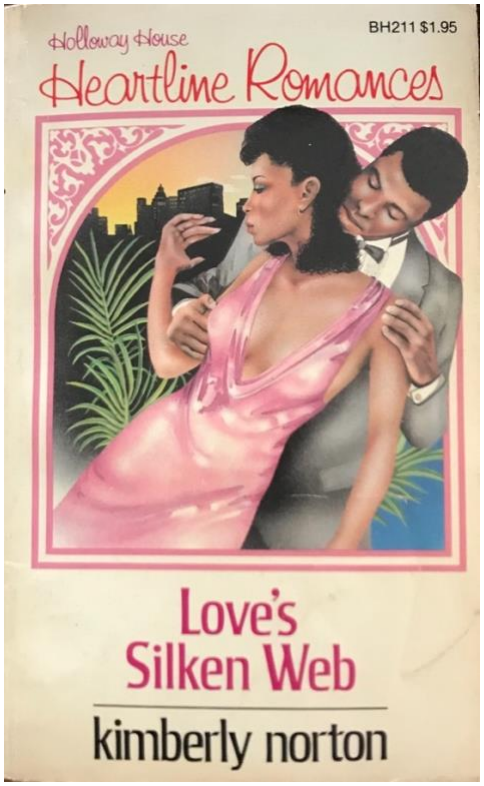

Figure 9. Kimberly Norton [Joseph Nazel], *Love's Silken Web* (Holloway House Publishing Company, 1984)

Niche Marketing in Romance Publishing, 1970s-1990s

The niche marketing model for category romances was set by Harlequin Enterprises in 1971 with the appointment of W. Lawrence Heisey as the company's president. A former marketing and advertising executive at Proctor & Gamble, he created a successful marketing campaign that focused on targeting white, middle-class, married homemakers in the United States. To attract this audience, Heisey partnered with Proctor & Gamble and gave away a novel with every purchase of a P&G domestic product. For example, Harlequin romances were packaged inside boxes of laundry detergent and other household cleaning products.[40] Once a big enough business base was established through these giveaways, Heisey returned to a more traditional approach to advertising. Following the distribution models of paperback publishers like Penguin Books and Pocket Books, he bypassed traditional bookstores and sold Harlequin Romance novels at supermarkets, drugstores, and chain variety stores that women frequented. Using the Mills & Boon method of generic branding, Harlequin marketed the romance novel as a standardized packaged good. A series of novels were sold in lieu of a single-authored novel, and readers knew what to expect with every purchase of a Harlequin Romance: a 192-page romance with a happy ending without explicit sex or offensive language.[41] This niche marketing campaign solidified Harlequin as the "go-to" publisher for romances and set the model for its competitors.

Harlequin's conservatism, however, opened gaps in its monopoly of the romance publishing market, as it only published sweet romances written by British authors that were Mills

[40] Markert, Publishing Romance, Location 669.
[41] Paul Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin and the Empire of Romance* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1996), 14.

& Boon reprints instead of original manuscripts. In 1972, Avon published the first sensual historical romance, titled *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss. The novel is known as the first modern "bodice-ripper," and it served the market of readers wanting romances with more explicit sexual content.[42] This format was increasingly duplicated by other American publishers in the late 1970s and set the trend for sexualized historical romances in that decade. In 1976, Harlequin published its first American author, Janet Dailey, whose novels were set in the United States and catered exclusively to American readers. Dailey's manuscript was approved for publication by editors at Mills & Boon to abate the criticism from American readers wanting relatable content. Once Harlequin signed Dailey, however, the firm continued to reject other American writers because it "already had their American author."[43] Silhouette, Harlequin's major competitor, took advantage of this opportunity and began to publish the backlog of rejected manuscripts from American writers in 1980.[44]

In 1979, Vivian Stephens, an editor at Dell Candlelight, introduced a contemporary line of romances called Candlelight Ecstasy Romance that introduced a more mature and experienced American romance heroine. Her method of understanding her market was through field work. Much as Kensington Corporation's chairman Walter Zacharius would do later, in the 1990s, Stephens spent a day at Woolworth's observing the buying habits of romance readers. She made two observations. The first observation was the low interest for Candlelight's contemporary romances. If shoppers bought a novel from the publisher, it was from their Regency line of

[42] "Bodice-rippers" were titled as such because of their aggressive male protagonists and their blurred lines of consent. As editors continued to change the formula of romance into the 1980s and 1990s, issues of consent and women's desire followed the social and political movements of the eras.
[43] Regis, *A Natural History*, 159.
[44] Ibid.

historical romances. The second observation was the type of reader buying romances, women in their thirties and forties. During the course of the day, Stephens interviewed shoppers. One shopper she interviewed was an executive secretary at a brokerage firm on Wall Street with a master's degree in Greek.[45] She said that she did not like the Candlelight contemporaries because "the heroines were too insipid, no one was that innocent."[46] At this time in the early 1980s, Candlelight's romance heroines, and the content of romance novels, still reflected Victorian values. The typical heroine was in her late teens or early twenties and sexually inexperienced.

From this feedback, Stephens decided to increase the interest of Candlelight contemporaries by updating the content and requesting submissions from authors who wrote heroines and storylines for the modern American woman who was demanding equal rights in a patriarchal society as well as living through a sexual revolution. "I told my writers exactly what I wanted," said Stephens, "The heroine had to have a certain age [at least 25], a certain job. She had to be upwardly mobile. The hero was icing on the cake, because without him she could still have a full life. If she wanted flowers, she could buy them herself. She didn't have to wait for a guy."[47] The novels, as Stephens described them, were sensual. "I wanted [the line] to be sensuous because, as I said at a meeting once, men and women do go to bed with one another without the benefit of clergy. And so far as we know, they don't go straight to hell."[48] At writing workshops, she directed writers to read the best-selling book *The Joy of Sex* (1972) by Dr. Alex

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[45] Markert, *Publishing Romance*, Location 1684.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Mimi Swartz, "Vivian Stephens Helped Turn Romance Writing Into a Billion-Dollar Industry. Then She Got Pushed Out.," *Texas Monthly*, August 19, 2020, https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/vivian-stephens-helped-turn-romance-writing-into-billion-dollar-industry/.
[48] Markert, *Publishing Romance*, Location 1742.

Comfort in order to incorporate an authentic sensual aesthetic to their novels.[49] Another aspect that was important to Stephens was that the novels be set within the United States or its territories because "the average American woman will never go to the south of France or the Greek Isles. However, she most certainly can get to the most celebrated spot in her town, or in her state, or in the country.[50] The result of this criteria was the launch of the new contemporary line of romances called Candlelight Ecstasy Romance. The line proved to be successful and a major competitor for Harlequin's contemporary line, Harlequin Presents. As with Avon's sensual romances of the 1970s, American publishers in the 1980s were quick to emulate Dell's new formula and adjust their content to meet the interests of their readers.

Stephens' market research, as an editor working for a major publishing company, helped create a line of category romances that closely represented the social, cultural, and political lives of women living in the 1980s. I now pivot to a 2004 study completed by Gwendolyn E. Osborne, an African American journalist, that exclusively focused on Black readers of romance in the 1990s. This study is important to my research because it offers the readers' perspective in an industry shaped by highly focused niche and market-research-driven marketing. Published 10 years after the birth of the African American romance novel, Osborne's work reflects the outcome and success of such marketing, especially as it pertains to an exclusive market of Black readers. In the study, Osborne interviews first and second generation African American romance readers. The first-generation readers are those who read romance novels prior to the availability of romances featuring Black characters, and the second-generation readers are those who began to read romance fiction after the inception of African American romance imprints like

[49] Swartz, "Vivian Stephens."
[50] Market, *Publishing Romance*, Location 1742.

Arabesque.[51] While readers from both generations found the books from white authors enjoyable, they found it hard to connect with them because their cultural identities were not adequately reflected. The appeal of Black romances for the readers were representations of Black people in committed relationships and depictions of women who look like them – not just physically, but politically, socially, economically, and emotionally.[52]

A first-generation romance reader in the study discussed her joy with the introduction of Black romances in the 1990s. She said:

> "I was in heaven when the black romances came out. You no longer had to pretend that you were the character with long, flowing, blonde tresses or steamy blue eyes. We had to read that because it was all that was available. When I discovered Arabesque romances, I just went stone crazy behind that stuff."[53]

Another reader said:

> "African American romance novels are so popular because they reflect the values of the majority of the Black community [better] than most other types of media. The men and women are educated professionals, gainfully employed…or are entrepreneurs, upwardly mobile. The women are independent, career-minded with goals. Both are law-abiding citizens. Readers seldom see these images reflected on the evening news or in the daily paper."[54]

Black romance appealed to Black readers because it pushed against the traditional romance formula, making it distinct from the mainstream form of the genre. It depicted love in all sizes, shapes, and skin tones and reflected Black communities throughout the Black Diaspora. As Osborne reflects in her study, African American readers could enjoy romance novels that were relevant to various aspects of their cultural identities.

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[51] Gwendolyn Osborn, "Women Who Look Like Me: Cultural Identity and Reader Responses to African American Romance Novels," in *Race, Gender, Media: Considering Diversity across Audiences, Content, and Producers* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2004), 61.
[52] Ibid., 67.
[53] Ibid., 63.
[54] Ibid. 65.

Scholars discussed sexual content of romances in relation to Black women's sexuality and the negative stereotypes attached to Black bodies. While the criticism of white romances was directed at the perceived reinforcement of white, patriarchal ideology in the 20th century, Black feminist scholars and literary critics of the 1990s argued that open sexual expression in Black romance novels reinforced negative stereotypes, and that the sexual expression allowed to white women in romance novels was not equally extended to Black women.[55] These scholars and critics, like their white counterparts, equated Black romance fiction to soft-core pornography, ignoring the positive reception of the novels by Black, mostly female, readers of the genre. A second-generation reader in Osborne's study explained that romances, unlike pornography, portrayed love, romance, and sensuality in a positive adult manner. She said, "In romance novels, a man puts a woman's pleasure first."[56] Another reader explained the appeal of courtship in romances: "In other media, we see intimate relationships being treated casually – like a handshake, but not that personal. [Romance] demonstrates [the protagonists'] appreciation and love for one another and solidified their relationship for me, elevating their sharing and mutual respect from a by-product, to the backbone of their intimate exchanges."[57]

While further ethnographic scholarship is necessary to explore Black readers and their interest in genre romance, it is likely that the Black romance of the 1990s fulfilled Black readers' fantasies through their positive depictions of Black love, stable Black families, and most importantly, honorable Black men.[58] Like Stephens' fieldwork to create a successful category

[55] In Chapter 3, "Reading the Black Romance," I explore Black love, sexual politics, and the representation of Black women's pleasurable sexuality in Arabesque's novels.
[56] Osborne, 64.
[57] Osborne, 65.
[58] In Chapter 2, "More Than 'Tinted Brown' Love Stories," I explore the art of writing Black romances, examining elements of Black romance that appealed to Black authors and readers alike.

romance line of novels for Dell Publishing that attracted the more modern female romance reader, Osborne's study of Black romance readership reflects the importance of understanding one's market in order to produce a successful product.

Black women were at the helm of Pinnacle Books' Arabesque line as editors and authors, therefore they controlled how the terms of their fantasies were defined – within reason. White gatekeepers still controlled mainstream publishing and had the ultimate decision-making power of whose stories were told and by whom. Black editors like Vivian Stephens and Monica Harris may have advocated for Black romance and contributed to niche marketing efforts to appeal to Black readers, but the emergence of an exclusively Black category romance line was more complex than the prevailing marketing techniques of era. There were substantial debates over what Black readers could or should read based on the conventions of a romance genre that limited its character and story depictions middle-class communities. As I explore in my examination of Fox network's narrowcasting, white executives' perception of a monolithic Black community also limited the creativity and authority of Black decision-makers.

A Case Study: The Fox network and Black viewership

These debates about romance readership and marketing were part of a much larger conversation about Black media audiences in the 1970s to 1990s, one that was taking place in the television industry as well. Television in the 1970s was dominated by the Big 3 networks: ABC, NBC, and CBS. These networks "embraced the stability of homogeneity and formulaic programming practices" because they faced no serious competition that pushed for innovation or diversification of programming.[59] Beginning in the 1980s, middle-class white audiences began

[59] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 82.

to replace these Big 3 networks with cable subscriptions, while working-class Black and Latino audiences continued to rely on standard networks that, unlike cable subscriptions, were free.[60] During this decade, Black audiences watched 44 percent more network television than white audiences and preferred Black television shows.[61] As a result, television programming in the mid-1980s shifted to include shows that appealed to both Black and white audiences such as NBC's *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*.[62] By 1986, the Fox network was launched, and it utilized narrowcasting, or targeting, to appeal to a young, urban viewership – teenagers and African Americans. The Fox network, by 1993, was airing the largest single crop of Black-produced shows in television history.[63]

Keenan Ivory Wayans, an actor and creator of the popular television show *In Living Color*, said of Fox: "They wanted to be the rebel network."[64] *In Living Color* was a majority Black-led sketch comedy show that aired on Fox from 1990 to 1994. At the time Fox decided to air the show, the network was looking for alternative programming that distinguished it from ABC, NBC, and CBS. Wayans said:

> "Fox changed the course of black television *unintentionally*. They didn't go out to make black shows. They went out to make alternative programming. And when I came along with *In Living Color*, they were actually very fearful of what I was doing. But they knew that it was something different. And that's what they have to get credit for. By allowing that voice to be expressed, they discovered a whole new audience."

Black actors and creators like Wayans had creative license and agency to define the limits of their art to a certain degree. As executive producers of their own shows, they had decision-

[60] Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television.* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

making power to hire writers, producers, and directors who shared their visions. Black television shows were shaped by a specific formula of autobiography, improvisation, aesthetics, and drama that spoke to in-group audiences.[65] In-group audiences are audience members who are not necessarily Black, but who identify with what may be described as shared "Black" positionalities, experiences, memories, or desires.[66] Although there may have been crossover appeal to non-Black audiences familiar with Black cultural references, Black writers and producers created television programs on Fox that were unique to one specific audience – African Americans.

To explain the formula of Black television shows, I use *Living Single* as an example, as the television show's background closely relates to Black romance fiction of the 1990s in its representation of Black women's desire (see Figure 10). It ran on Fox from 1993 to 1998. Like Black romances, *Living Single* rode the wave of Terry McMillian's best-selling 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale* that portrayed Black women as economically secure and living their lives unconcerned about the approval of white society. A book blurb from Vogue says the novel "tracks four black thirty-something women friends waiting for the men who will finally make things right…While the culture and vernacular of the book reflect the black middle class, the struggles – with love, family, food, work, money – are universal."[67] White executives at Fox wanted to appeal to Black audiences using what Kristal Brent Zook calls the "desperation theme" – a "market-driven theory that black audiences appreciate regressive representations of women."[68] Jacqueline Bobo explains that the attempts to profit off the success of McMillian's

[65] Ibid., 5.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Terry McMillian, *Waiting to Exhale*, Back cover, 1992.
[68] Zook, 65.

work meant that Black female cultural producers were limited to the framework of McMillian's formula if they wanted financial backing from mainstream overseers.[69]

Yvette Lee Bowser, the creator of the show *Living Single*, created a show that was autobiographical about her own life experiences living in New York City with her Black girlfriends. The characters she created were extensions of different parts of herself:

> Regine (Kim Fields) is a materialistic fashion horse; Khadijah James (Queen Latifah) is a self-made entrepreneur who publishes her own magazine, *Flavor*; Synclaire James (Kim Coles) is Khadijah's dimwitted but adorable cousin; and Maxine Shaw (Erika Alexander), the ever-present neighbor, is a ruthless attorney who thrives on large quantities of food and sex.[70]

The show was initially titled *My Girls*, but network executives changed the title to *Living Single* to avoid male alienation. To appeal to the *Waiting to Exhale* audience, executives also changed the direction of the show from "a slice-of-life comedy about girlfriends" to a narrative about the "male quest" or the "Fight for Mr. Right."[71] Fox executives' push to cash-in on a desperation theme ignored the impact of a novel like *Waiting to Exhale* for Black audiences and diminished the potential for storylines that explored Black womanhood beyond the search for love and romance. As Bobo explains, "the importance of *Waiting to Exhale* is that it effectively demonstrated that Black culture is not monolithic and that Black readers respond to a range of stories of Black life. They are attracted to more than simply those that…present the 'escape from the ghetto story."[72] Essentially, the *Waiting to Exhale* audience wanted variety in Black storytelling and not necessarily an adaptation of the same story.

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[69] Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women As Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 20.
[70] Zook, 66.
[71] Zook, 67
[72] Bobo, 21.

Improvisation was the second element in formulaic Black television. It employed the practice the practice of signifying, "a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection."[73] During tapings of shows, Black performers were instructed to "play the dozens" to connect with the audience – both in studio and at home. "Playing the dozens" is a historical practice of communication among African Americans that involves "a contest of personal power – of wit, self-control, verbal ability, mental agility, and mental toughness."[74] This practice is clear in the dialog of *Living Single*, especially between the characters Regine and Maxine. To an outside audience unfamiliar with the practice of "playing the dozens" the jokes and criticism between the two characters comes off as harsh and sometimes cruel, but the goal in this rhetorical strategy is not necessarily to offend, but to connect and participate in the pursuit of communal sharing and joy.[75]

Culturally specific aesthetic references include Afrocentric clothing, hair styles, and artifacts that performed specific functions in Black shows that "invoked romanticized spaces of mythical unity and nationalist desire."[76] This element is reflected throughout *Living Single* from the decoration of the women's apartment to Kadijah's Black-owned magazine, *Flavor,* to Maxine's signature bob-styled braids. The last element of Zook's formula, drama, is the exploration of painful in-group memories and experiences such as issues of colorism, racism, and sexual violence. While *Living Single* did not incorporate many of these issues in its

[73] Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele, "'Joy Is Resistance': Cross-Platform Resilience and (re)invention of Black Oral Culture Online," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 825.
[74] Catherine Knight Steele, "The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016), 3.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Zook, 8.

storylines, there were discussions that centered sexism and classism. Including this element in Black shows was a struggle for Black creators in the 1990s because Fox's white gatekeepers, TV executives and advertisers, expressed their disinterest with Black complexity on network television. Although there were a few issue-orientated episodes of Black television shows to which African American viewers connected, the white financial base of the Fox network preferred the traditional "joke-per-page" comedy format of Black sitcoms.[77] As Zook argues, Black creators' demand for Black complexity may have been the downfall of Black programming on Fox. The network wanted Black viewers on its own terms – to build and sustain the network. Once Fox bought the rights to the National Football League's (NFL) Sunday games, the network sought white legitimacy.[78] The Black programming that appealed to teenage and Black audiences was dropped in favor of appealing to a broader, whiter audience.

I compare the Fox network to Pinnacle Books in that the publisher, like Fox, was a rebel. It was the first to seek out romances that appealed to niche audiences, similar to Fox's search for alternative programming. By launching Arabesque, Pinnacle Books appealed to a Black, largely middle-class, female audience. Like Fox, the publisher intentionally sought out Black readership with its romances, setting out to change the course of romance fiction. While the publisher's motives were not altruistic, the intentional pursuit of championing Black romance helped launch Black authors into a space where their work was available to an African American readership. Black romance novels, like Black sitcoms, incorporated the formula of autobiography, improvisation, aesthetics, and drama to connect to the readership. Dialog, storylines, plots, and characters had in-group cultural references. While the aim of Arabesque's protagonists was to

[77] Zook, 9.
[78] Zook, 11.

find love, romance, and a happily-ever-after, they also had to overcome painful pasts and experiences. I cannot argue that viewers of Black television turned to Black romance novels for an exploration of Black complexity, but I can say that these novels offered Black readers a degree of this complexity in their examination of Black interiority.

In 1998, Arabesque was sold to BET Books, an imprint of Black Entertainment Television (BET). Pinnacle Books, however, remained in service to the line by continuing to publish the novels while BET Books provided the promotion. The media corporation adapted several Arabesque novels into TV movies that aired on the BET network.[79] [80] At the time, BET was the largest media conglomerate targeting Black audiences in the United States. The network began developing online book clubs, electronic retail outlets, and print advertising campaigns designed to promote the novels. Arabesque's authors made guest appearances on BET talk shows, and many of the novels were adapted into screenplays for made-for-television movies. Black romance authors, by 1999, had finally found the corporate backing "to turn a risky niche market into a profitable publishing concern."[81] With the money from the sale of Arabesque, Pinnacle Books set out to recreate their success with Latino readers through its launch of Encanto Romances, an English-Spanish line featuring Latino characters that debuted in 1999.[82] Unlike Fox's search for white legitimacy, Kensington Publishing and its imprints continued to find success in appealing to the interests of ethnic markets.

Pinnacle Books' decision to launch the Arabesque line in the summer of 1994 can thus be viewed as the culmination of a number of longer term trends: romance publishing's historical use

[79] "PW: Kensington Adds and Subtracts," *Publisher's Weekly*, June 29, 1998.
[80] Steve Ammidown, "A Black Romance Timeline," *Romance Fiction Has a History*, February 16, 2021.
[81] Burley, "Hearts of Darkness," 127.
[82] "Kensington Adds And Subtracts," *Publishers Weekly* 245, no. 26 (1998): 12.

of niche marketing to appeal to an ever-changing market of readers since at least the 1970s, the longstanding work and advocacy of Black editors and authors inside and outside white romance publishing, Pinnacle Books' reputation as an innovator and trend-setter in the romance industry, the acclaim and response to McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, and the recognition of Black readers, particularly Black women, as a profitable market in the industry. I contribute the success of Arabesque, and the subsequent birth of the African American romance novel, to its segregation from white romances. When including ethnic romances in their predominantly white category romance lines, Dell Candlelight and Harlequin's single concern was cross-over appeal and not alienating white readers. In contrast, Pinnacle Books focused solely on appealing to Black readers with a dedicated line of romances that centered Black experiences and included characters that looked like its readers. Effectively, Pinnacle Books treated Black readers the way mainstream publishers have historically treated white readers. Black creators and decisions-makers may have faced some limitations in the types of stories that were produced, but they actively laid the groundwork for Arabesque, and subsequent Black romance lines, by single-mindedly creating and promoting an exclusive genre for a Black readership. They dutifully identified their market and went after it.

Figure 10. *Living Single* (Fox Network, 1993-1998)
Left to Right: Erika Alexander, Queen Latifah, Kim Fields, Kim Coles

Chapter Two
More Than "Tinted Brown" Love Stories

In her keynote speech for the 2004 Romance Slam Jam[83] in New York City, author Evelyn Palfrey recalled her introduction to Pinnacle Books' Arabesque line. She was at her daughter's school and noticed another mother reading a novel with a Black couple on its cover. Intrigued, she walked up to the woman and asked, "Where'd you get that?"[84] The woman, having just finished the novel, gave it to her, and Palfrey said she read the entire novel that night. The next morning, she went to the Black bookstore on a mission to buy more Black romances. She was excited to find so many Black romance authors on the shelves. She explained:

> Talk about a kid in a candy store! Rochelle Alers, Maggie Ferguson, Gwynne Forster, Donna Hill, Beverly Jenkins, Francis Ray. I bought one of each…Those writers brought me so much joy. I no longer had to pretend. The heroine not only looked like me, but she acted like me. And thought like me. And the heroes – they were like the men I knew.[85]

As Palfrey noted, with Arabesque novels, she, like other Black readers, no longer had to pretend the heroine had a short afro instead of long, flowing blond hair. Heroes described as tall, dark, and handsome were actually Black men. As of 1994, depictions of love, desire, and pleasure were available to Black readers. Black writers had the freedom to explore the complexity of Black love and life, knowing that there was a market for their romances. Looking back from the perspective of Arabesque's 10-year anniversary, author Sandra Kitt explained the importance of

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[83] The Romance Slam Jam was founded in 1995 by Emma Rodgers, Ashira Toshiwe, and Francis Ray as an event to connect Black writers with their readers. It was also an alternative to the predominantly white romance conferences that did little to market Black romance. Rodgers, the owner of the Black Images Book Bazaar in Dallas, Texas, reflects on the history and growth of the Romance Slam Jam in an oral history interview from HistoryMakers at https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/emma-rodgers.

[84] Evelyn Palfrey, "Romance At Any Age," Black Issues Book Review (Jan-Feb 2005), 16-17.

[85] Ibid.

the line for African American writers: "Once Arabesque came along, if you were an African American writing fiction, you knew you could submit work to them. Our work had a home."[86]

In this chapter, I examine the structure of Black romance novels through a study of the genre fiction writing guides published between 1999-2003 that centered African American popular fiction.[87] My analysis is shaped by the following questions: How do Black romance novels fit into the traditional structure of romance as well as push against it? What are the motivations of the genre's authors in their characterizations of Black men and women? Why are these stories important? In answering these questions, I argue that Black romance writers faced a challenge in crafting depictions of Black people and communities, as they were writing against the myth of a Black community monolith. This myth was not just from the purview of a white society but came from within the community itself. Black romances followed the guidelines of the romance fiction genre, meaning that no matter the cultural orientation, romances generally depicted middle-class American values. Consequently, some readers took issue with how Black life and culture was represented by Black writers of romance.

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[86] Diane Patrick, "Ten Years of Sizzling Chocolate Kisses and Lasting Love: Now Under BET Books, Arabesque celebrates a Decade as Black Romance Publisher," Black Issues Book Review 6, no. 4 (2004).

[87] The writing guides in my study include *How to Write African American Fiction*, an unpublished manuscript written by Gwynne Forster and Donna Hill (2003), *Telling the Tale: The African American Fiction Writers Guide* by Angela Benson (2000), *The African American Writer's Handbook* by Robert Fleming (2000), and *How to Write A Romance for The New Markets* (1999) by Kathryn Falk. Forster, Hill, and Benson are a pioneering African American romance authors of Black genre romance, and Fleming is a prominent African American journalist and author of poetry and genre fiction. Falk is the founder of *Romantic Times*, a genre magazine specializing in romance novels that has reviewed every African American romance novel published since the beginning of the development of the sub-genre. Although Falk is not an African American romance author, her writing guide features a section dedicated to multi-cultural romances that include essays from prominent African American romance writers.

While the motivations for many authors was to write back against the prevailing negative imagery of Black men and women in a white dominant society, their main goal was to appease an intra-racial community that dealt with its own issues and biases shaped by classism, colorism, sexism, and internalized racism. Crafting believable stories for a diverse market of Black readers meant exploring the varied histories, cultures, and experiences of Black people across the Diaspora while also maintaining the genre's structural guidelines. These elements created complexity in Black romance novels and pushed against genre limitations to craft novels that were more than just carbon copies of white romances. Following Kitt's description of these novels, I contend that they were more than love stories with lead characters that were tinted brown.[88]

The Craft of Writing Black Category Romance

The most important features of a romance novel are its hero and heroine. According to Kitt, all romance, no matter its characters' cultural backgrounds, should depict a heroine that is strong and independent and a hero that is capable of caring and gentleness.[89] The difference between Black and white romances, she explained, are the changes in the voice and circumstances of the hero and heroine. These aspects are affected by their histories, backgrounds, and societal influences. She writes: "These stories are textured with cultural details that can be clearly attributed to a particular section of the population. These details can include word or phrase usage, hairstyles and fashion, holiday customs, entertainment, foods and even, specifically identified communities."[90] Arabesque authors followed strict guidelines in

[88] Sandra Kitt, "New Faces, New Voices – Same Story," in *How to Write a Romance for the New Markets,* 232.
[89] Ibid., 233.
[90]Ibid., 232

crafting love stories that appealed to a Black readership based on these cultural details. *Essence Magazine* published an advertisement for Arabesque in 2001 that described the novels as "richly detailed love stories featuring hip and culturally relevant themes… The characters look and live as we do, and each book has what we'd all want: a satisfying ending to relationship drama."[91] Writers balanced authentic representations of Black experience with the elements that were central to genre romance. Those elements included representations of stable and committed relationships, upstanding heroes that embodied the desired qualities of an ideal partner, and for Black readers specifically, stories that took place within the Black imagination where Blackness was centered.

Black romance has a long history. In Chapter 1, I explored the ethnic romances of the 1980s, but threads of the genre stretch back to the literary fiction and domestic and social protest novels of the nineteenth century. Literary scholars Belinda Edmondson, Claudia Tate, and Ann DuCille explore Black diaspora romance and contend that, historically, the genre has included distinct elements of social ambition, racial uplift, and the institution of marriage depicted as for the good of the community. Exploration of Black sexual identity was not a component of Black romance until the twentieth century, as early Black fiction, according to Edmondson, was more focused on the romance as a way in which Black people could be more than objects.[92] In other words, Black romance was used to humanize Black people. This absence of Black sexuality and eroticism from early romance was probably to combat the negative stereotypes of Black people, particularly Black women, as hypersexual in nature.

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[91] Patrik Henry Bass, "African-American romance novels turn up the heat," *Essence* 32, no. 2 (2001): 80.
[92] Belinda Edmondson, "The Black Romance," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1/2 (2007): 196.

In *Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, DuCille uses the term "marriage plot" to describe "a fictional formula that foregrounds romantic relationships, focuses on courtship (wanting, wooing, and winning, one might say), and generally culminated in marriage or at least betrothal."[93] This conventional middle-class marriage plot was a key feature in Black domestic novels that were female-oriented and written between 1820-1860. Claudia Tate, in her study of these novels, explains that many of the stories were shaped by "love as duty" rather than "passionate love" and reflect varying ideologies about women's roles in the public sphere after marriage.[94] She notes that writers of domestic novels challenged the dominant society's belief about Black hypersexuality by crafting romance narratives that were not about passionate love "but rather compassionate duty, spiritualized affection, and sentimental attachment."[95] The romantic love that culminated in marriage was tied to the prosperity of the Black community and the Black family structure.[96] Literary representations of marriage, sexuality, and Black womanhood changed in the 20th century, despite the heroine's continued connection to social and racial uplift. DuCille argues that a "resexualization of Black womanhood" is supported in Black women's fiction written between 1924-1948 with the publication of Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937.[97] Although the novel does not have the typical happily-ever-after ending of most romance novels, many Black women read it as a romance because it celebrates the early sexual awakening and mature sexual happiness of its heroine.

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[93] Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, (Oxford University Press, 1993), 13.
[94] Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*, (Oxford UP, 1992), 98.
[95] Ibid., 167.
[96] Ibid., 107.
[97] DuCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 10.

The Black romance novels of the 1990s are similar in their representations of this sexual awakening and mature sexual happiness. I reason that the contemporary Black authors of the 1990s had similar motivations as early writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in balancing social uplift with sexuality. Although authors were writing for a predominately Black readership, they were crafting narratives about Black middle-class communities – communities that have long upheld respectability politics and have been wary of the white gaze. Not only did writers have to maintain guidelines produced by the major publishing houses for which they worked, but they also had to be cognizant of the guidelines of a population that has worn various masks in their daily struggles to negotiate and contest power in public spaces. Black life and representations of authentic Black experiences, more often than not, are hidden away from the public gaze. It was the job of Black romance writers to gain entry into those private spaces to fulfill reader expectation and desire.

Crafting Authentic Black Experiences in Romance

Angela Benson's *Telling the Tale: The African-American Fiction Writer's Guide* was published in 2000. A seasoned writer for Pinnacle Books' Arabesque line, she explained in her guide that research was important to make one's fiction as believable as possible. She said that although many parts of fiction are based on fantasy, it should also be grounded in reality.[98] Black writers were instructed to pull from personal experiences, and if they could not do that, then research and observation were necessary to execute authentic settings, plots, and characters. Personal experience was important for authenticity, Benson explained, because:

> As minorities in American culture, Blacks are in a position to provide social commentary on the system, the way things are. Minority status brings with it a mandate to understand

[98] Angela Benson, *Telling the Tale: The African American Fiction Writer's Guide* (New York: Berkley Books, 2000), 103-106.

> how the majority operates if one is to succeed in the majority culture. A story written out of this perspective can be quite powerful.[99]

Benson's statement draws on W.E.B. DuBois's idea of double consciousness that describes the internal conflict of marginalized groups living in an oppressive society. Arabesque authors depicted the lives of Black, middle class people. The protagonists were successful doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers, and business owners that maintained the expectations of white middle-class society while also upholding the values of their African American heritage. While racism was never a central plot device in these category romances, the systemic and institutional roadblocks that shaped Black success in white society was implied through an in-group understanding.

Despite this in-group understanding, as well as the inclusion of personal experiences to authenticate Black love stories, Arabesque authors received criticism from Black readers who felt that their novels were not Black enough. Some readers felt the Black couples on the cover of the novels were too light-skinned, while others felt that the sole depiction of middle class, educated people somehow lessened the blackness of the characters. Shirley Hailstock, for example, received criticism about her novel *White Diamonds*, as some readers were upset that her characters did not speak an identifiably African American dialect or have so-called authentic Black mannerisms. *White Diamonds*, first published in 1996, was a contemporary romantic suspense story that centered a math professor and a U.S. Senator involved in an intricate espionage plot (see Figure 11). Hailstock described the authenticity of her novel in a 1998 interview:

> [M]y Ph.D. math professor in *White Diamonds* would not speak broken English. Since most of her life has been bookish, and surrounded by people in the political arena, when

[99] Benson, *Telling the Tale*, 67.

> did she have time to learn to cook soul food? Why should all black people be required to eat it? Because there is a black couple on the cover, people decide what should be in the book. Why don't they do this with a white couple on the cover in the same fashion? With a white couple, they decide what should *not* be in the book, things like jail terms, homelessness, welfare, fractured English, black music. Yet if those things are not in a black novel, it's not "black enough." Black enough for whom?[100]

Authenticity of Black life and experience is difficult, especially when it involves the portrayal of an ethnic group as large and diverse as African Americans. As the Black community is viewed as a monolith, even by some African Americans, the behaviors, actions, appearance, and culture of one particular subset of the community represents the whole. When novels like *White Diamonds* and other Arabesque titles break the model defined by that subset, the cultural production is seen as inauthentic, even by the community itself. Blackness is subjective, and Arabesque authors depicted that subjectivity by breaking down the idea of a community monolith.

Arabesque authors Donna Hill and Gwynne Forster, in their 2003 unpublished writing guide called *How to Write African American Fiction*, described Black American cultural diversity as a resource for writers of Black romance in search of compelling cultural and geographical settings for their stories. Following this idea, Shirley Hailstock in her essay "Research and Writing Multicultural Romance," urged Black writers to expand their ideas of blackness and to explore the vastness of the Black Diaspora. Within the context of the 2000s when her essay was written, she specifically noted the large population of West Indians living in England and people of African descent in countries like France and Vietnam. Ultimately, Hill, Forster, and Hailstock were advising writers to understand Black history in their attempt to craft

[100] Dabney Grinnan, "Shirley Hailstock on Being a Pioneer," All About Romance, August 21, 1998, https://allaboutromance.com/shirley-hailstock-on-being-a-pioneer/.

authenticity and break the myth of a Black monolith.[101] From the advice in these writing guides, writers crafted stories that pulled from the "enormous reservoir of character types, histories, environmental conditions and documented human experiences" for ideas and themes about African American and Black experiences.[102] As I mentioned, the structural guidelines for category romances included stories that portrayed middle-class communities. Black romance writers, for the most part, maintained this convention, but many Arabesque authors pushed past popular romance limitations to discuss the relationship between Black middle- and working-class communities. Authors of single-title romance novels and romance anthologies of the early 2000s and 2010s, however, fully explored a broader range of Black experiences that clearly stepped over the boundaries of category romance.

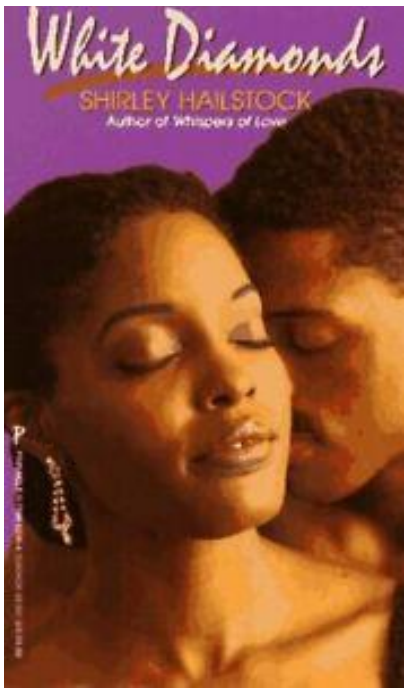

Figure 11. Shirley Hailstock, *White Diamonds* (Pinnacle Books, 1996)

[101] Hailstock, "Researching and Writing Multicultural Romance," 259.
[102] Gwynne Forster and Donna Hill, Manuscript – *How to Write African American Fiction*, 2003. Box 13, Folder 8-9. PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403, 5.

Crafting Black Characters in Romance

Crafting relatable Black characters was essential for the success of Black category romances, and Benson, in her writing guide, recommended both observation and pulling from personal experience to fashion such characters. One method of observation included visiting the mall in predominantly Black neighborhoods to observe how people's behavior and actions differ among neighborhoods. She admitted that not all Black families and communities are the same, but her second method relied on common character types in African American communities. Benson described these character types as "the well-to-do funeral director, the gossipy hairdresser, the loud Baptist preacher, [and] the activist city council member."[103] She further noted: "Some people would call these character types stereotypes, and, to a certain extent, they would be correct. They are stereotypes if we define the character as the character type. But remember, character types don't define characters, they merely give you a place to start." To fully develop these characters, the writer must analyze how they fit into the plot. Once they are fully developed, the writer can no longer be accused of stereotyping.[104]

Along with this characterization, Hailstock, asserts that the inclusion of elements such as background, traditions, methods of speaking and expression, speech patterns, description of skin color and hair, and setting are just as important to the characterization of Black romances. Hailstock writes, "Growing up is different for every individual – even members of the same household do not have the same experiences. However, the experiences they do share are culturally separable, and used in the definition of character."[105] This subjectivity in characterizing blackness in romance fiction further breaks down the monolith of the community

[103] Benson, *Telling the Tale*, 72.
[104] Ibid., 73.
[105] Hailstock, "Researching and Writing Multicultural Romance," 258.

and builds characters that embody individuality as well as a connection to collective memory and experience.

The first two novels that launched the Arabesque line in 1994 embodied this individual and collective spirit of blackness. Sandra Kitt's *Serenade* and Francis Ray's *Forever Yours* depicted different segments of the Black middle class. In a 1994 interview with *Romantic Times*, Kitt describes her motivations for writing *Serenade*: "Because of the lack of popular fiction about African Americans and black culture, I wanted to write a story that concentrated on the characters and their motivations, rather than rely too much on a complicated plot. I wanted the reader to come to know and care about a hero and heroine who have dreams and doubts and strengths not unlike her own."[106] *Serenade* is set in Washington, D.C., and its protagonists are musicians. After a nine-year absence, the hero, Parker, returns to the city after tiring of his celebrity status as a jazz musician. He wants to rekindle his past relationship with the heroine, Alexandra, who is still an aspiring singer with hopes of gaining the same successful career and celebrity as Parker. The plot centers Alexandra's choice of love or fame. In contrast to Kitt's novel, Ray's *Forever Yours* is set in Texas and explores the overlooked history and culture of Black cowboys. The heroine, Victoria, is a successful entrepreneur with a chain of lingerie shops. Her success is disrupted by an ultimatum by her wealthy grandmother: marry or lose her chain of stores that were built on a loan from her grandmother. Victoria enters into a fake, yearlong marriage with Kane, a modern-day cowboy and wealthy rancher, and must ultimately choose between love and the independence that her career offers.

[106] "Introducing Arabesque…a groundbreaking publishing program from Pinnacle Books!" *Romantic Times*, July 1994, 14.

While Kitt and Ray examined different aspects of Black experience in their novels, both writers created heroines who were strong and independent yet submissive to and emotionally dependent on their heroes. In both novels, it is the hero who wants marriage, and he must convince the heroine to step back from her independence and settle down. This dichotomy suggests that Black authors wanted to re-write the images of Black women while also preserving the character traits that Black female readers would emotionally connect to. The characterization of Black women as submissive and vulnerable softened their public image, countering the perception of Black women as aggressive and emasculating to Black men. In the same manner, this also suggests that Black authors wanted to create positive images of Black men as protectors and figures of stability, again, countering negative media images in television, film, and other genres of fiction. Like the domestic fiction novelists of the nineteenth century, authors of the 1990s used their novels as tools to progress a narrative about the prosperity of the Black family structure. This notion is not unique to romance novels, as Black sitcoms of the 1990s also strove to portray Black family structures that countered misconceptions.

Hill explains in her writing guide that while writing may be the best medium for Black people to control their image, it is also a medium well suited to despoiling that image:

> Fiction about African American life has been commercialized to the extent that a majority of books about African Americans deal with the disaffected, the anti-social, the ineffectual or the downtrodden. Certainly, our writers know that these characters are not representative of African American people and that they are, in fact, a declining segment. But they exist and must therefore be given a place in literature. The point is to give them the place that they deserve, not to extol them. Some of our writers would have us believe that vulgarity and profanity; that raw, almost animal-like sex, a low regard for women are the defining traits of black men. We know that this isn't true, but it sells.[107]

[107] Forster and Hill, *How to Write African American Fiction*, 4.

Hill is likely referring to a myriad of African American fiction that was published in the late twentieth century – from literary fiction to urban fiction. Prominent Black writers wrote about Black struggle as well as the sensational elements of street life. A genre of literature called "gangsta-lit" was extremely popular in the early 2000s and was described by editors as an extension of the 1970's blaxploitation films.[108] Black critics looked down on these types of novels because they exploited the very communities that Hill refers to in her above statement.[109] Although these types of stories were likely easier to see to major publishing companies because Black struggle was, and continues to be, the single narrative of Black life in the United States, these Black critics ignored the fact that there was a major Black audience that desired these types of stories, even if they did nothing for the social uplift of the race. Another point that Hill highlighted were poor depictions of Black men in literature. This reference emphasized distinct aspects of Black women's literary fiction of the era.

During the rise of Black romance in the 1990s, Black women writers of literary fiction such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were writing novels that drew attention to the abuse that Black women have suffered at the hands of Black men. Although these author's novels received acclaim, they garnered resentment from Black male critics who believed that Black women's writing was stereotyping Black men using the same ideology as the white dominant culture. According to Ann DuCille, Black male writers wanted Black women to write past the sexism of Black men for the sake of the race.[110] In consequence, any work of fiction that depicted Black men in a negative light was considered male bashing instead of an exploration of

[108] Reid and Abbott, "Talkin' About Black Books," 26.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ann DuCille, "Monster, She Wrote: Race and the Problem of Reading Gender-Wise," in *Skin Trade* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62.

the total range of Black women's experiences. This is the importance of breaking down the myth of a Black monolith through storytelling. Writers have the power to include a multitude of experiences and voices in their interpretations of Black history and culture so that readers have the choice to read both Toni Morrison and Sandra Kitt to appreciate the varying perspectives of Black women.

Black romance and Black women's literary fiction are two sides of the same coin, as they paint a picture of women's sexuality based on a diverse set of circumstances, experiences, and behaviors – whether they be fantasy or reality. Both genres explore the complex relationships between Black men and women, but I think the development of the Black romance genre is, in part, due to the criticism of Black women's literary fiction and the call for racial solidarity. Black romance novels, at least Arabesque category romance novels, fit into the discourse of deference that DuCille defines as a, "a nationalistic, masculinist ideology of uplift that demands female deference in the cause of empowering the race by elevating its men."[111] In 1994, Arabesque novels were some of the first instances of Black joy and love in print during an era when Black trauma and struggle was marketed as the sole example of Black experience. Readers were guaranteed an emotionally satisfying ending and depictions of Black men that contrasted greatly with other media and literary images. One of the main appeals of any romance is its hero, as he is the key to stable relationships and family structures within the idea of a patriarchal marriage, the ultimate goal for most romance novels.

Arabesque author, Marcia King Gamble, explains her motivations for writing Black romances and Black male characters: "Of course, I can only speak for myself, but I use my stories to educate, to eradicate the myth of the chauvinistic, insensitive, Black male unable to

[111] Ibid., 65.

show feeling."[112] Beverly Jenkins', a pioneer in the subgenre of Black historical romance, agrees with Gamble: "We hear very little about the positive roles Black men have played in the forming of the nation. History *does not* support the myth that they were shiftless, wife-beating, non-contributing, members of American society. However, research *does* support their bravery, their commitment to education and family, and their never-ending quest for justice."[113] Adding to this, Gwynne Forster, described her motivations in crafting Black heroes:

> Contemporary romances, on the whole, provide the reader with men we feel are desirable. The men are educated, dependable, reliable, generous, and good family men. The man treasures his woman. He cherishes her. She gives him, in return, his manhood. He's there for her. Our men are loving, upstanding, and take care of their families. If they didn't, our race wouldn't survive. Our romances reinforce that view.[114]

Black romance authors, in many of the writing guides I examined, describe any negative perspective about Black men, particularly by Black women, as male bashing and emphasized the uplift of Black men and manhood in genre fiction. While the statements by Gamble, Jenkins, and Forster reflect an effort to emphasize the positive characteristics and contributions of Black men, they fail to consider the intra-racial sexual politics of Black communities. Along with idealized fantasies of Black men in romance, criticism that focuses on the complexities and truths of Black love relationships and Black masculinities are important and should not be limited to Black literary fiction.

Like many readers of Black romance, I bring my experience with me to every novel I read. This experience includes the distrust and the disappointment that surface with patriarchal ideals about Black masculinities that often hinder my ability to see Black men – be they fathers,

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[112] Marcia King Gamble, "How I Finally Got Published" in *How to Write A Romance for the New Markets*, 265.
[113] Beverly Jenkins, "Writing the Historical Multicultural Romance" in *How to Write A Romance for the New Markets*, 272.
[114] Fleming, *The African American Writer's Handbook*, 260-261.

brothers, friends, or lovers – as protectors and sources of stability. Consequently, it is difficult for me to imagine Black men as romance heroes. Their depictions in Arabesque novels do not settle any of my qualms, as they are represented within a patriarchal structure that reinforces masculinity that is dependent on female subordination. In the 1960s and 1970s, well before the introduction of Black romances, white feminists criticized romance novels for their support of patriarchal ideals. As Black romances are created in the same structure as their white counterparts, I question how Black womanhood is represented in a genre with a history for reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Black womanhood has historically been shaped by the controlling images that are "distorted renderings of those aspects of [Black women's] behavior that threaten existing power arrangements."[115] Though dated, controlling images continue to take on new forms in contemporary society and are prevalent in popular culture. They include the Matriarch, the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. Matriarchs are aggressive women that have overstepped their place and become the head of the Black family, thereby causing the emasculation of the Black man and the deterioration of the Black family structure. The Mammy is submissive, understanding her place within the elite, white male power structure. The Jezebel is the hypersexualized and lewd representation of the Black woman, and the Sapphire is the stereotypical angry Black woman who refuses to be submissive. These characterizations of Black women make it difficult for them to fit into conventional standards of femininity and womanhood, therefore, the choice of Black writers to soften their heroines allowed them to fit Black women within the traditional structure of romance. The Black hero tames the Black

[115] Patricia Hill-Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 2000), 107.

heroine into submission to support the conventions of the genre as well as to uplift Black men to their rightful positions as the head of the family structure.

For example, in Ray's *Forever Yours*, the heroine comes off as an ungrateful, strong-willed woman who is willing to give up the love of a good man to be an independent and successful business owner as well as retain the freedom of single womanhood. There's a point in the novel where the heroine is pushed into the role of the villain until she realizes that she has wronged the hero in not giving all of herself to him. Similarly, in Kitt's *Serenade*, the heroine's desire to become a famous singer is disrupted by the hero's vision of domesticity. In both instances, the hero saves the heroine by showing her the proper path to happiness through submitting to love and marriage. As I mentioned, there is a dichotomy to the representation of Black womanhood in romances. Along with the appeal of the ideal hero, Black writers understood that Black women also wanted to see Black women prospering – having the success of a stable relationship along with a successful professional life. The majority of the heroines in Arabesque novels ultimately keep their careers, but authors created a narrative that too much independence and professional drive was detrimental to positive love relationships. Too much independence on the part of the heroine conflicted with the hero's masculinity and the perception of Black men as sources of protection and stability. This characterization, however, is the appeal of early Black romances for readers who sought positive representations of Black love.

The fantasy for readers was a man who treated his heroine with love and respect. Ray iterates this point in explaining her motivation for writing Black romance: "I was yearning to read a romance book with a black man who was loyal, compassionate, intelligent and handsome

— I wanted to read a 'Mr. Right' for me."[116] With women at the center of romance – as writer, reader, and heroine – there is a power to (re)shape the narrative of Black womanhood and the expectations they have for Black men. Author Gay G. Gunn said that her heroines followed the three S's, "sense, sanity, and self-esteem."[117] "Good Black men exist," she said. "My message to Black women is to stop settling for less, use patience, and find these men."[118] Arabesque novels satisfied readers' fantasies about love and relationships, and Black heroines, despite being tamed by their heroes, had the power to choose the type of relationship they wanted instead of expending time on men who were unworthy of their affection and attention.

Gender ideology played a major role in Black romance of 1990s, especially in the midst of the gender war between Black men and women writers. Black romance authors chose between crafting narratives about racial solidarity and narratives that explored issues of sexism within Black communities. While its apparent that authors chose to uplift Black men in their stories, there were authors who did critique antiquated views of marriage and gender roles. I described Black women's literary fiction and Black romance as two sides of the same coin, as both genres reflected Black women's experiences with Black men. The masculinities represented in both genres range from tender to toxic and are defined by dominance over women. One genre is shaped by trauma and the other is shaped by joy, but both reflect Black women's empowerment and resiliency. Black experience is not singular, and despite pushback about the representation of blackness in Arabesque novels by Black readers, authors effectively explored

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[116] "Francis Ray, Dallas School Nurse Who Became Prolific Romance Novel Writer, Dies at 68," Dallas News (The Dallas Morning News, July 13, 2013), https://www.dallasnews.com/news/obituaries/2013/07/11/francis-ray-dallas-school-nurse-who-became-prolific-romance-novel-writer-dies-at-68/.
[117] Fleming, *The African American Writer's Handbook*, 261.
[118] Ibid.

the diversity of Black communities and countered the perception of the Black community as a monolith.

I conclude this study by recalling Evelyn Palfrey's speech at the Romance Slam Jam. She tells the story of when she discovered her teenage daughter was reading the same romances that she bought that one morning at the Black bookstore. In a conversation with fellow author Beverly Jenkins, she relayed that she was disturbed that her daughter had read romances from Donna Hill, Gwynne Forster, Brenda Jackson, and others because "those authors write some 'hot' books."[119] Jenkins replied, "Evelyn, at least from our books, she learns how a good man behaves and how a good man treats his lady." Essentially, Black category romances allowed the next generation of romance readers the opportunity to see varying degrees of Black love in print. Unlike the prior generation, these readers did not have to pretend, as the heroines looked like them and the heroes, hopefully, were like men they knew or would come to know.

[119] Palfrey, "Romance at Any Age," 17.

Chapter Three:
The Politics of Black Love in Print

In 1948 and 1953, Albert Kinsey, an American biologist, published his reports on the sexual behavior of the human male and female. They were based on in-depth, face-to-face interviews called sexual histories of more than 18,000 individuals.[120] To the shock and outrage of a morally conservative public, the reports reflected that men and women engaged in masturbation, premarital sex, and "homosexual encounters."[121] Kinsey's report on women quickly came under attack because it undermined "America's moral fiber," as its findings showed that nearly 50 percent of all women had premarital affairs and 26 percent had extramarital affairs.[122] Some members of the public challenged this report because they believed it must be biased toward prostitutes as no respectable, "normal" woman would have agreed to talk to Kinsey about sex.[123] These members of the public were partially correct. Kinsey's report on female sexual behavior was biased because the research sample and overall findings were based on white, middle-class, women.[124]

Black publications of the time such as *Ebony* and *Jet* offered their conclusions as to why African American women were excluded from the 1953 report, saying that "upper-class Negros" were race conscious and suspicious of anyone who wanted to put their sex lives under a microscope.[125] They noted that Kinsey found "too few college-educated colored women [who]

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[120] Karen Winkler, "Kinsey, Sex Research, and the Body of Knowledge: Let's Talk About Sex," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005), 287.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid, 307.
[124] Leisa D. Meyer, ""Strange Love": Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture during the 1950s." *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012).
[125] Ibid., 632.

would talk…although those with grade and high school educations were very cooperative."[126] In maintaining the performance of respectable middle-class womanhood, Black women stayed away from sexual discourse in the public sphere, like Kinsey's study of sexual behavior, so as to distance themselves from the common stereotype of the Jezebel. This controlling image was derived during the era of slavery that defined Black women as hypersexual and lascivious in nature. While Kinsey's reports officially sexualized American culture and brought into public discourse the once private and taboo subject of sex, Black women battled with maintaining a culture of silence in regard to sex and sexuality while also consuming a newly sexualized print culture.

I use this history of Albert Kinsey and a sexualized 1950's American print culture to put into context the public discourse of Black sexuality as well as to bring to the forefront the politics of Black love in print in the 20th century. Although Black publications have played key roles in shaping the appropriate behavior to which Black people should adhere, they have also been conduits of expression and education. Black magazines and newspapers foregrounded discussions of sexual subjectivities, explicitly engaging in sexual discourse to contest the hegemonic white presumptions, myths, and stereotypes that formed the foundation of contemporary sexual knowledge.[127] Historian Kim Gallon, in *Pleasure in the News: African American Readership and Sexuality in the Black Press*, argues that the Black Press, in its publication of editorials, fiction stories, news reports, cartoons, photographs, and letters to the editor created a set of overlapping Black sexual public spheres where Black readers could view, discuss, and share information about sexuality.

[126] Ibid., 632.
[127] Meyer, "Strange Love," 649.

Gallon contends that these public spheres "challenge a conception of the Black Press as wholly fostering racial solidarity within African American life relative to a dominant white public sphere. They, instead, highlighted the rich diversity of black thought and sexual expression in the early twentieth century."[128] From the same standpoint, I argue in this chapter that Black romance fiction created public spheres for Black women to explore and express their concepts of Black love, relationships, and sexuality. This exploration and expression, at least in the early history of Black popular romance, did not extend outside of the white patriarchal stipulations of marriage and the nuclear family. Nonetheless, I believe the representations of Black love in category romances like Arabesque set a precedent for more progressive representations of Black sexual politics in contemporary romances of the twenty-first century.

As I will reflect in this chapter, Black love is more than emotion that is acted out on the pages of a romance novel. It is a political act that, throughout history, has both humanized and politicized Black people. My goal is to understand how Black romance novels interpreted the complexity of Black love for readers seeking escape, fantasy, and emotional connection to characters and storylines that spoke to Black life. How did readers respond to the politics of Black love in print, and how representative were these novels of heterosexual relationships in the 1990s? To answer these questions, I explore Black love and marriage within the context of the late 1990s and early 2000s to understand how Black readers, particularly Black women, may have responded to depictions of intimate relationships in romance novels.

[128] Kim Gallon, *Pleasure in the News: African American Readership and Sexuality in the Black Press,*(Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 4.

The Politics of Forbidden Black Love

Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* that "contemporary intimate love relationships are influenced by a convergence of factors that collectively shape each individual's lived realities as well as his or her perceptions of what is possible and desirable."[129] While love may appear to come from nowhere, she says, it is profoundly affected by political, economic, and social conditions. Therefore, I disagree with the concept of universality of love that the genre of popular romance widely promotes. The documented history of the genre disproves this assumption in that it is founded on the representation of love between white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gender men and women that fit the ideal conventions of masculinity and femininity. Further, these ideal couples aim to fulfil the requirements of patriarchal marriage. My research into Black romance history has reinforced for me the idea that representation and visibility is not always the key to an inclusive history when that history is shaped by a white, patriarchal structure. The politicized history of Black love does not fit into that structure, therefore, for Black romance novels to be representative of Black love relationships, they need to break the conventional standards of genre romance.

In *Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage*, Dianne M. Stewart deploys the concept of "forbidden Black love" to reference the "manifold structures and systems that make prosocial romantic love, coupling, and marriage difficult, delayed, or impossible for millions of Black people in America."[130] She explores the resiliency and attempted erasure of Black love in American history from its roots in racial slavery, segregation,

[129] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 249.
[130] Diane M. Stewart, *Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage*. (New York: Seal Press, 2020), 8.

and its contemporary representations in popular media. Black romantic love, as Stewart argues, is deeply entangled with structural power that spawned policies and American customs that desecrated Black marriage and family life. Black women, in particular, have consistently been targets of this desecration, as is reflected in the 1965 *Moynihan Report* written by Senator Daniel Moynihan. It cites single Black mothers as the reason for the deterioration of the Black family structure and the emasculation of Black men because of the disproportionate number of female-led households in Black communities. The report offered social and political recommendations focused on ways to help Black men reclaim their place as the head of the household by shaming Black women's historic ability of making a way out of no way.[131]

The shame placed on Black womanhood and Black mothering by Moynihan is the same shame proffered to Black women by the Black Church that calls on them to adhere to the oppressive structures of white patriarchal marriage. According to Stewart, "the patriarchal marriage ideal is so embedded in Black culture that we can easily forget the historical moment when most African Americans began to accept and practice it – the post emancipation period during which Freedmen's Bureau agents and White Southern proprietors required Black women and men to adopt patriarchal marriage as a precondition for obtaining labor contracts and the livelihood to sustain their families."[132] She, along with other Black feminist scholars like Brittney Cooper and Patricia Hill Collins, recommend that Black communities step away from the divisive structure of Euro-Western definitions of marriage and adopt partnerships and family structures that better reflect the historical experiences and needs of Black people.

[131] Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 116.
[132] Stewart, *Black Women, Black Love*, 196-196.

Existing within the limitations of patriarchy hinders progressive Black sexual politics because it pits Black men and women against one another. Cooper states that a partnership, and all the practices that are necessary to achieve it, disrupt the social hierarchies that currently structure Black intimacy, explaining that:

> Partnership demands that we meet each other on equal footing. Partnership stops placing the entire onus on Black men to profess, protect and provide. That's too much weight to carry. We all need someone to speak up for us, to look out for us, and to share resources to help us make it. We bring all our strengths and weaknesses to the table. We agree that no matter what, we ride for each other. We decide that we are coconspirators in a project of Black love. We agree to do the work we need to do to be together. We center a justice practice as a love language. We commit to being intimately and relationally just with one another. (243)

This idea of partnership in Black romance breaks with any attempt to build love relationships on the foundation of traditional gender ideology that is modeled in whiteness.[133] A problematic Black gender ideology that is coupled with an unattainable white hegemonic gender ideology leaves (heterosexual) Black men and women struggling to develop honest affirming love relationships.[134] The idea that the "onus to profess, protect and provide" should not solely be placed on Black men is eye-opening, especially in Black genre romance where historically, authors have set out to prove that Black men are capable of providing support and stability for Black women and children. A progressive Black sexual politics changes the shape of Black romance in that Black women are not the only central characters in the storyline. The needs and desires of Black men, as they work through the legacy of prevailing Black gender ideology, are also central to the love story, as a partnership is reciprocal and dependent on honesty and open communication.

[133] Collins, 259.
[134] Ibid., 258.

Slavery created the conditions of what some scholars call "fictive" extended families and what Stewart refers to as African heritage or Africana kinship arrangements and family structures. These structures "allowed African captives and their descendants in the Americas to retain their sense of purpose, family, and community and to express sociality in anti-Black, anti-African, and antisocial environments."[135] There is no concept of the single mother in this structure because the mother-child unit exists within a social web of intimate human bods that make up a large family system of support.[136] In this instance, the concept of Black love extends beyond intimate romantic relationships to the bond of Black kinship. As I explained in Chapter 2, this concept of family and community love is not new to Black romance, as social upliftment has been a focus of the genre since the nineteenth century.

Contemporary Black romances of the late 1990s and early 2000s slowly moved towards this concept of partnership and depictions of Africana kinship structures, but Black heroes were still considered the head of the household – the provider and protector of Black women and children. The majority of Arabesque novels presented Black heroines as educated and successful in professional careers or as entrepreneurs, juggling the needs of their partners, family, and in some cases, children. Black readers may have been attracted to the fantasy of Black men as providers and protectors, possibly as a reaction to the attempted erasure of Black love in American history and the desecration of Black marriage and family, but also because of the realistic depictions of the resiliency of Black women. Perhaps romance novels that depict healthy Black relationships and intimacy were not merely forms of escape and fantasy for Black readers, but visual representations of the resiliency of Black love – love that is not only

[135] Stewart, *Black Women, Black Love,* 217.
[136] Ibid.

contained between partners but spread throughout the community as well as internally through self-love and an acceptance of Blackness. Instead of thinking that romance disempowers Black women by elevating the importance of men in their lives, it is important to view romance novels as relationship guides for Black women in their traversal of sexual politics and sexual discourse within the public sphere.

Black Romance Novels as Relationship Guides

The popular print culture of the 1950s grasped on to a sexual discourse and saturated the market with publications and literature that challenged the obscenity laws of the era. Confession magazines, some of the earliest iterations of romance fiction, were among the few publications that catered exclusively to a female audience, and Black and white women alike gravitated to the long-running magazines *True Story*, first published in 1919, and its competitor, *True Confessions*, first published in 1922. Targeted to working class women in Southern and Midwestern small towns, the confession magazine was once referred to as the "Family Behavior Magazine."[137] The principal formula of many confession stories is that "a simple, trustful human is faced with a complex, real and brutal world. Characters make their discovery of truth by bumping up against bad trouble as they rush headlong down the line of least resistance."[138] In fighting back against the brutal world, the heroine first sins, then suffers, then repents.[139] In this formula, the traditional notions of motherhood and femininity are reinforced. The pull of confession magazines like *True Story* and *True Confessions* was that working-class women could identify with the narrator's

[137] George Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," *Social Problems* 6, no. 1 (1958), 30.
[138] Ibid., 35.
[139] Ibid.

struggle to overcome her difficulties and rid herself of any shame that came with her economic status.

In 1950, *Tan Confessions* debuted as an African American version of these magazines in the hope of reflecting "a side of Negro life that is virtually ignored in most publications today [1950s]" (see Figure 12).[140] Two years later, the magazine was converted to *Tan*, a lifestyle magazine for Black, middle-class communities with similar confession-type stories (see Figure 13). Like other confession magazines, *Tan Confessions* was written in a confession-style format where women confessed their sins to the readers in a first-person narrative. While *True Confessions* and *True Story* were targeted to white, working class women, *Tan Confessions* was targeted to African American middle-class women. The narrators were presented as elite women in their society and played to the ever-present notion that inappropriate social behavior led to the loss of economic privilege and lifestyle. Driven by consumer culture, the magazine reinforced the ideas of social mobility, racial uplift, and respectable, middle-class femininity, much like the Black romances of the 1990s. Similarly, romance novels offered the same connection between the narrator and the reader. The difference is that romances were written in an alternating third person narrative between the hero and the heroine. Just as the narrator for confession magazines must overcome hardships, the hero and heroine of romance novels also sin, suffer, and repent to achieve the requisite happily ever after.

I compare the reading practices of confession magazines to that of romances, considering how readers interact with the literature. Roseann Mandzuik, in her analysis of confessional discourse, discusses three dimensions that are central to understanding women's reading

[140] Meyer, "Strange Love," 629.

practices. First, the reader adapts to the world of the text, identifying with and having empathy for the protagonist. The reader then constructs a comparison between herself and the world of the text, so the act of reading potentially heightens awareness through the process of imagination. Second, the act of reading allows for questions to be raised regarding women's circumstances. Mandzuik says that "readers thus use popular culture as a mediating force, allowing for both submersion in and transcendence from their own circumstances and perspectives. The act of reading allows for the text to become a site for the negotiation of meanings as readers contrast their own experiences with those of the textual world."[141] Lastly, the act of reading provides a set of resources for women readers. These resources offer a means for expression of desires and experiences that provide a sense of hope and community by offering validation for the reader's perspective.[142] Using this logic, I consider the experiences of romance readers of the 1990s.

In Chapter 2, I reflected on my skepticism of Black men as romance heroes and sources of protection and stability because of how patriarchy affects Black masculinities and the relationships between Black men and women. In her own reflection of these relationships, Brittney Cooper writes:

> Black men frequently don't acknowledge our vulnerability, don't seem to think we need defending, and don't feel a political responsibility to hold Black women (who aren't their mothers or sisters or daughters) up and honor them. Patriarchy numbs men's collective pain sensors, and it causes Black men to not see Black women as worthy of care and concern. (93)

This criticism is important because it unpacks the patriarchal constraints and gender ideology of Black men in genre romance. It also puts into question why romance novelists so readily presented representations of relationships that possibly contradicted the reality of Black love in

[141] Roseann Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires: Power and Pleasure in True Story Magazine," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001), 180.
[142] Ibid.

the 1990s. Relationship guides of the decade described the constant friction between Black men and women. They also called out Black men's preference for white women and the anger and resentment it caused Black women. Black men voiced their preference for non-Black women by declaring that Black women were too materialistic, too argumentative, too demanding, and just too much.[143] Black romance novels were like soothing balms for Black women because they offered perfect portrayals of Black men respecting and choosing Black women. While they depicted idealized partners, they were useful to Black women as loose guides in considering expectations and limitations in potential love relationships.

Entitled to Good Loving: Black Men and Women and the Battle for Love and Power was a popular relationship guide published in 1995 by psychologist Audrey B. Chapman. In it, she discussed how her clients' expectations were so high that they caused disappointment. Black women wanted a perfect man: "Not only is he kind, handsome, loving, and supportive, but he is also rich. He is able to fix things – both material and emotional – when they are broken. He is a wonderful lover who, no matter what else is going on in his life, is sensitive and very attentive in bed. A great protector from harm, he is also a soulmate."[144] This description of the perfect man is very close to the typical hero presented in romance novels, and Chapman explains this perfect man does not exist anywhere for anyone. She explained the same is true for Black men who described their perfect partners as an extension of their mothers: "She is accommodating, a tireless listener, and an unquestioning cheerleader. No matter what his shortcomings, she will be

[143] Bebe Moore Campbell, "Black Men, White Women: A Sister Relinquishes Her Anger," in *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues: Black Women Writers on Love, Men, and Sex,* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 120.
[144] Chapman, *Entitled to Good Loving: Black Men and Women and the Battle for Love and Power* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 10.

there to nestle his weary head on her bosom."[145] Chapman says that men want unconditional love, but romantic love always comes with conditions and that is where profound disappointment occurs. Again, the ideal woman, as described by Chapman's clients, depicts similar characteristics of romance heroines found in many of the category romances in the 1990s.

Chapman explained that loving partnerships are built on reality, and that until Black men and women are willing to let go of unrealistic fantasies, they cannot face each other as loving equals. While I believe there may be harm by holding onto unrealistic fantasies that are based on the characters and relationships in romance novels, I disagree with Chapman's advice to give up those fantasies. There is good in setting one's expectations based on positive relationships and specific character traits even if they come from romance novels. It is the same as setting expectations based on the relationships of parents and grandparents and valuing the characteristics and personality traits of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Many of the characters and relationships presented in Black romances were based on real people from authors' lives. Further, contemporary romance novels emphasized reality and were filled with social commentary. The hero and heroine experienced similar social issues as their readers, and the readers got to see how they worked through those issues to have healthy, long-term relationships. "[R]omances serve as a guide to relationships for the audience," said Monica Harris, the editor for Pinnacle Books' Arabesque novels. "Sometimes people

[145] Ibid.

discover the parameters of their relationships in these books, even if the male point of view is womanized and idealized."[146]

Harris also points out that because women experienced the world differently from men, they demanded different things from these books. As Cooper explains, "[Black women] know what it means to face horrific violence and trauma from both our communities and nation-state and carry on anyway…We get heartbroken, our feelings get stepped on, our dreams get crushed…We know what it means to feel invisible."[147] Perhaps, Black women read romance to feel visible because Black love, as presented in Black romances, humanized women in the care shown to them by the male protagonists. This is the emotional connection that I think many Black women gravitated to in Black romances because caring for Black women's actual lives meant sitting with the acuteness of their fragility and understanding that they break too.[148]

Maintaining Black love relationships means negotiating historical barriers that condemn Black women for their inability to fit into conventional structures of beauty and femininity. Marriageability based on physical characteristics, financial stability, and patriarchal expectation affected Black women's love relationships with Black men in the 1990s, as it continues to do so today. Overall, marriage among Black women is historically lower than marriage among white women, and this is contributed to the psychology of beauty and desire in Black communities. Euro-centric aesthetic values and ideals that pertain to physical characteristics such as skin shade, hair texture, and facial

[146] Robert Fleming, *The African American Writer's Handbook: How to Get in Print and Stay in Print*. First ed. (New York: One World, 2000), 262.
[147] Ibid., 3.
[148] Cooper, 102.

features reinforce misogynoir, as do stereotypes that describe Black women as aggressive, hypersexual, and domineering. Historically, Black men have viewed lighter-complexioned Black women as more attractive than darker-complexioned Black women, and consequently; there is a higher percentage of marriage among light-complexioned women.[149] The perceived submissiveness of white women, as compared to Black women's aggression, has been the reasoning behind Black men's decisions to marry interracially. Higher rates of education and job security among Black women compared to Black men make patriarchal expectation in some Black marriages unattainable because men cannot reach the head of household position. Many of these factors affected Black women's marriageability in the twentieth century, as did the fear of a shortage of marriageable Black men in America – men that were educated and financially stable.

This fear was reinforced by Black men's preference for white women. Bebe Moore Campbell, in her 1993 essay "Black Men, White Women: A Sister Relinquishes Her Anger," writes that Black women were thirsty for Black men whose ranks had been decimated by homicides, incarceration, and drug addiction in greater proportions than other groups.[150] She explained that Black women felt "psychologically assaulted" when they perceived that Black men favored and idealized white women: "They believe that they are being penalized, not only because of the way they look, but because they possess the emotional strength that, while essential during the eras of slavery and segregation, isn't deemed quite feminine enough for today's Black man on the rise."[151] This fear of a shortage of good heterosexual and marriageable

[149] Stewart, 180.
[150] Bebe Moore Campbell, "Black Men, White Women: A Sister Relinquishes Her Anger," in *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues: Black Women Writers on Love, Men, and Sex,* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 119.
[151] Ibid.

Black men caused desperation in some Black women that made them willing to play into the assumptions of gender ideology to maintain relationships with Black men who were problematic, fundamentally disrespectful to Black women, and who upheld prevailing Black sexual politics.[152] To be considered acceptable and desirable to Black men, Black women endorsed traditional gender ideology because "[i]n a context in which men are intimidated if not repelled by 'strong women,' becoming more submissive seemingly increases a woman's chances of finding a Black male partner."[153]

While I maintain that early Black romances contributed to a discourse of deference to Black men and that the plotlines of these novels attempted to tame Black heroines into softer and more amicable personality traits, these romances placated the fears of Black women in their searches for Black love. It also allowed for a public discourse of Black sexual politics. Heroines, both light-and-dark-complexioned, were written in a manner that promoted Black women's beauty, strength, determination, and resiliency in times of hardship. They were tastefully sensual and feminine, a clear distinction from the hypersexual Jezebel. Respectability politics and ideas of morality were definitely key features in some romances, but many heroines, in contrast to the 1950s middle-class Black women who kept their sex lives private, were presented as sexually experienced. They were educated about birth control and participated freely in sexual exploration and pleasure within the realm of monogamous relationships. Black female desire and pleasurable sexuality, for the first time, was placed in the public sphere and celebrated through the production and consumption of Black romance novels.

[152] Collins, 256.
[153] Ibid.

Despite patriarchal expectation, Black love in romance novels was presented as more of a partnership than a patriarchal marriage. Whereas the hero is fully capable of providing for the heroine, each character enters into an egalitarian relationship with the expectation of continued financial and business success in their independent lives. Family, friendship, and community also played major roles in the storylines, demonstrating that Black love encompassed more than a romantic love relationship between the hero and heroine. Writers used their platform to examine the changing roles of women in the domestic sphere. Canadice Poarch's *Intimate Secrets* is an example of the changing ideals of marriage and women's statuses within the home (see Figure 14). The novel, published in 1999, centers Johanna Jones, a new owner of a historic hotel, and Jonathan Blake, a successful owner of an aerospace company. As both hero and heroine are business owners, the two must manage a partnership that breaks traditional marriage expectations. In the following scene, Johanna's mother is disappointed that her daughter is not meeting the generational expectations of a good wife that dotes on her husband by cleaning the house and fixing him a nightly dinner. A week into her marriage, Johanna is visited by her mother, Gladys, at work where she is berated for working so much overtime:

> "Men like for their women to cook," Gladys said.
>
> "He wouldn't have married me then. I'm not a fantastic cook and you know it." Will there ever be an end to the nagging, Johanna wondered?
>
> "Now that you're married, it's time you learned. I'll be happy to teach you," she offered.
>
> "Mom, there's more to a marriage than cooking. Besides, I don't have time for cooking lessons right now, but thanks."
>
> "It's a woman's job to see that her husband is well fed. I've always had a nice hot dinner prepared for your father. I never neglected my wifely duties," her mother continued.

> Johanna entwined her fingers very tightly together on her desk and managed a tight smile. "You never worked a full-time job outside of the home, either, mom. I do."[154]

Later in the scene, after Gladys admonishes Johanna for allowing her husband to clean his own house, Gladys asks, "If he's going to do the housework, why does he need you?" Johanna responds that her husband cooks and cleans because he loves her.

This intergenerational discussion about wifely duties puts into perspective the changing notions of marriage and the importance of partnerships. Johanna's husband supports her business aspirations as well as an equitable relationship. His only expectation is for Johanna to support him emotionally. A major turning point towards the end of the novel is when Johanna misses her husband's awards dinner because of work. She had been so involved in preparing to open her new hotel, that she forgets the appointment. Unsurprisingly, Johnathan is angry and disappointed with his wife, despite her apology, and Johanna is defensive:

> "Why do women have to understand when men work overtime, but the situation isn't reciprocal," she said
>
> "It is reciprocal. I understand. I cook the food, I clean the house. All I asked was for you to appear at one function in three weeks of marriage. Just one function. Was that too much to ask?"
>
> Johanna sighed. "No."
>
> "Who are you married to, Johanna, the hotel or me?"[155]

Reflecting on the argument, and how she let her husband down, Johanna asks herself, "What had she done to enhance their marriage, to strengthen the bond between them?"[156] After his anger subsided, Johnathan reflects, too, on the argument asking himself why he was not more patient and understanding to his wife who is in the midst of accomplishing her lifelong dream of

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[154] Candice Poarch, *Intimate Secrets* (Washington D.C.: BET Publications, 1999), 218.
[155] Ibid, 232-233.
[156] Ibid, 234.

becoming a hotel owner. He understood her need for success as well as her professional drive. He commiserates with the busy schedule of a new business owner, and admits to himself, and later to his wife, that he was acting like a "chauvinist pig."[157] As with all romance novels, there is a happy ending, but that happy ending is based on the premise of compromise, communication, and understanding – the key factors to a successful partnership. Johanna and Jonathan modeled for readers a progressive and healthy partnership that was realistic. The way that they dealt with their problems in the novel allowed readers to put into perspective gender ideology as it related to marriage and partnerships. It is true that romance novels fulfill readers' fantasies of ideal partners and relationships, but they also allow readers to discover the parameters of their own relationships.

[157] Ibid., 247.

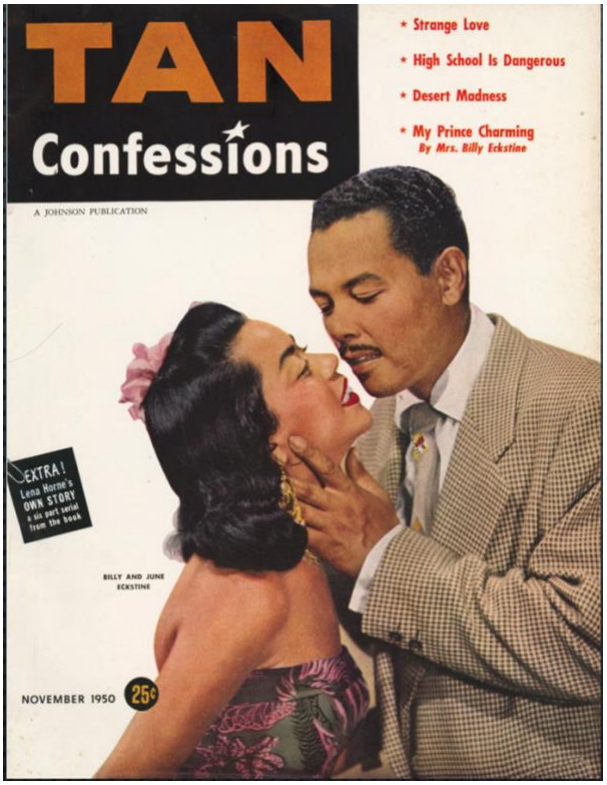

Figure 12. Tan Confessions (Johnson Publishing, Nov. 1950)

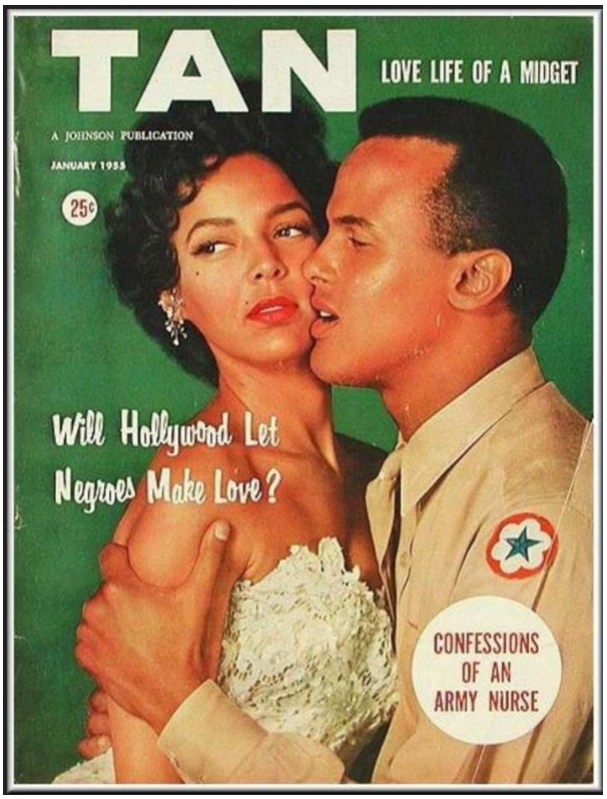

Figure 13. Tan (Johnson Publishing, Jan. 1955)
Cover Image: Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte

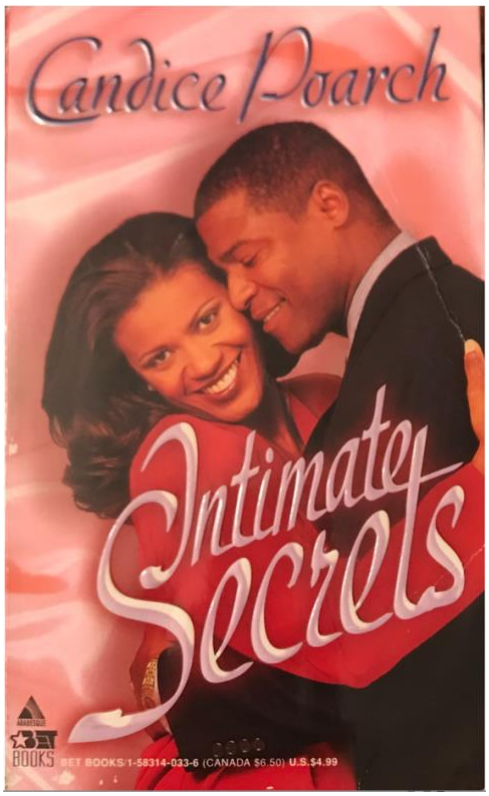

Figure 14. Candice Poarch, *Intimate Secrets* (BET Books, 1999)

Reading the Black Romance

The skill of finding similarity in literature where there is only difference is common for non-white readers, as many of the books that we read, especially as children and adolescents, are not inclusive of our experiences and our backgrounds.[158] We are constantly tasked with finding ourselves in characters that do not look like us by focusing on our emotional connection with them instead. This emotional connection is what attracts readers to romance novels, and for Black romances specifically, this emotional connection is tied to social issues and experiences that affected a multitude of Black readers. The birth of African American romance novels allowed Black readers to "suddenly see themselves existing."[159] Michelle Caswell uses this phrase in her discussion of symbolic annihilation in institutional archives and asserts that the creation of community archives for minoritized communities allows for representational belonging that is a counterweight to symbolic annihilation. I use representational belonging in my documentation and discussion of Black romance history. Not only does this concept allow Black people to feel represented in the past, present, and future within romance history, but the very content of romance novels contributes to Black history and the study of contemporary Black life. Representational belonging works on three separate levels: epistemological, ontological, and social.

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[158] WeNeedDiverseBooks (www.diversebooks.org), a non-profit and grassroots organization, advocates for essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote diverse literature for young people. Its vision is "a world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book." The organization's definition of diversity includes, but is not limited to, LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.

[159] Michelle Caswell, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing": Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *The American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016), 75.

Within community archives, the epistemological level represents the past – *we were here* – and empirical evidence for a community asserts the community's existence in the past.[160] In the case of romance, my documentation of the pioneering Black authors, editors, and the novels themselves establish Black romance history through material artifacts. The ontological level – *I am here* – reflects and asserts identities in the present, allowing individuals "to suddenly see themselves existing" in ways they previously could not and did not.[161] For this level, I refer to the stories themselves. Each novel is a presentation of the present – at the time it was written – and that story documents the political, cultural, and social lives of individuals through the many subgenres of Black romance. Lastly, there is the social level – *you belong here* – that allows minoritized communities to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion through interaction with the community archive.[162] Black romance history as well as Black romance reading thrives through interaction from social media groups, book clubs, author chats and seminars, festivals, podcasts, and even RWA chapters. While there exists no community archive, digital or physical, with the sole purpose of collecting Black romance history at the moment, the romance community is extremely interactive, and this sense of belonging and inclusion to the groups I mentioned creates a community that is loud enough to call out the overlooked and misrepresented history of Black women in romance.

My research into Black romance history started with one question: Why do Black women read romance fiction? Without actually conducting a study that speaks to readers themselves in the manner of Janice Radway, Gwendolyn Osborne, and Jacqueline Bobo, I can only hypothesize based on the content of the novels, the motivations of the writers, and the

[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.

cultural and political context of the era. Like the confession magazines of the 1950s that primarily depicted white women, Black readers bought and read romances before the birth and widespread popularity of African American romance novels in the 1994. Black readers learned from an early age to identify themselves in literature, not through representation, but through an emotional connection with the story and its characters. I think this is the case for Black readers of confession magazines and romance novels. This connection deepened with the launch of Arabesque.

Black readers saw themselves, their families, and their friends in these novels. They valued the representation of Black love despite the reader criticisms about the type of people and backgrounds that were presented in Arabesque novels. The range of social issues that authors tackled in their novels was diverse. Candice Poarch's heroine in *The Last Dance* overcomes her experience with sexual assault on her path to loving and trusting the hero. In Brenda Jackson's *Tonight and Forever*, the divorced heroine is recovering from an abusive marriage. Donna Hill in *Temptation* writes about a newly widowed heroine who must come to terms with her rise from poverty to wealth. Felica Mason's heroine in *For the Love of You* is a single mother trying to build a new life by fulfilling her dream of finishing college, and in Gwynne Forster's *Sealed with a Kiss* the heroine is reunited with the son she gave up for adoption (see Figures 15-19). Although I only mention the heroines of these novels, the heroes face and overcome hardships as well during their search for love. Arabesque's novels featured heroines and heroes that were divorced, widowed, or looking for first love amid a myriad of complexities that Black readers identified with on a personal level. Of course, for many readers, these books were merely entertainment.

The average reader of Black romance in 1999 was female and between the ages of 25 and 45. In fact, this demographic was the largest consumer of African American books – fiction and nonfiction – during the era.[163] At the time, books were marketed to Black communities through nontraditional avenues such as hair salons and Black churches, as word of mouth proved to be the best promotion of African American fiction because Black consumers tended to favor personal recommendations over canned advertising.[164] According to editors in the 1990s, Black readers saw reading as a social activity and depended on friends, family, and trusted booksellers more than the media to recommend titles.[165] This is the reason that many advertisers during the era used radio promotions to attract Black readers. Hearing a book recommendation from DJs on popular Black radio stations and programs, even if that recommendation was a paid advertisement, was like receiving the recommendation from a trusted member of the community.

The relationships that book promotors established with booksellers, Black and non-Black, was also crucial to the success of Black fiction. Romance authors Donna Hill, Shirley Hailstock, and Sandra Kitt all discussed how booksellers had no idea how to shelve Black romances. Instead of shelving them in the general romance section, Black romances were shelved in the African American fiction book section.[166] While it may have been easier for Black readers to find romances this way, it discouraged non-Black readers of romance from discovering these titles, thereby significantly affecting the reach of Black romance. In some cases, it was easier for book advertisers to promote Black horror and mystery fiction than it was to promote romance

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[163] Carol Taylor, "A Diverse Market for African-American Books Keeps Growing," *The Publisher's Weekly* 246, no. 50 (1999), 37.
[164] Karen Holt, "Shades of Black Fiction," *The Publisher's Weekly* 250, no. 49 (2003), 16.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Romance Writers of America, "A Critical Discussion on the History of Black Category Romance," Panel Discussion, August 2020.

fiction. One editor explained, "People love to be scared, so we did really push the mystery bookstores and the chains to stock them in the horror section [instead of the African American fiction section]. Fear is fear."[167]

The editorial guidelines for Arabesque novels considered the education and class levels of its readers in order to publish novels that fit with their readers' literary tastes. Editors cautioned authors against using profanity in the text and limited the discussion of social issues that could potentially take over the story. Per the rules of genre romance, love, instead of conflict, must be central to the storyline. Monogamy was also promoted between the hero and the heroine:

> [N]either the heroine or the hero can be sexually nor emotionally involved with anyone at the time they meet. Premarital sex is allowed, as long as it is tastefully described and in the context of an exclusive romantic relationship. However, Arabesque does not want heroes and heroines to live together before marriage, because this shows there is no commitment. [168]

The Arabesque readership appreciated these guidelines, as they felt they made for a great story. In fan mail related to Gwynne Forster's novel *Sealed With A Kiss* (1995), several readers commented on the depictions of sexual content in the novel. One reader wrote, "Your book is well written, romantic and tastefully sexy…Please continue to write beautiful love stories featuring African American characters; it's been long awaited."[169] Another reader wrote, "*Sealed with a Kiss* hit a real nerve for me. It was normal people dealing with life's many trials, at least the kind of people I've known all my life. The lack of filth was a tribute to your skill in

[167] Holt, "Shades of Black Fiction," 17.
[168] Burley, "Hearts of Darkness," 155.
[169] Valerie Bernard, Letter to Gwynne Forster, 7 October 1995. Box 4, Folder 15, PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403.

giving a story the pizazz it needed without being gross."[170] Lastly a reader said, "I have a reading group of 6 Black-American females. We love sensuality, hearth, and home. We love passion. Please don't forget to include it in your books."[171]

These letters were written to Forster between 1995 and 1996, each offering the author feedback from her novel, *Sealed With A Kiss*. The novel centers Naomi and Rufus as the hero and heroine, two people with extremely different outlooks on domesticity and a woman's place in the home. Rufus feels as if career women, in their pursuit of success, leave their children to fend for themselves, causing them to turn to drugs and gangs for attention. His perspective is shaped by experiences with his ex-wife, a model who tricked him into marriage and subsequently abandoned her children, and his mother, a woman who had no choice but to work to help care for an ailing husband and two children. Rufus' views on marriage are very conservative, and he expects a lot of emotional support from the women in his life. Naomi does not call herself a feminist, but she does defend the right for women to have both a career and a family. As a teenager, she became pregnant and gave up her baby for adoption, a secret she keeps from Rufus for fear of his turning against her and viewing her as he does his mother and his ex-wife. The novel depicts single fatherhood, distinct class divisions, and at-risk children who both Naomi and Rufus mentor. The story reaffirms the importance of an Africana kinship structure as well as social and community uplift through mentorship of at-risk Black youth.

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[170] Linda Pickett, Letter to Gwynne Forster, 14 December 1995. Box 4, Folder 15, PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403.

[171] Verdie Blackshear, Letter to Gwynne Forster, 1996. Box 4, Folder 15, PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403.

Many of the letters that Forster received were from women readers, but she did receive one letter from a male reader that praised the depictions of single fatherhood in the novel. He wrote: "The issues you raised are both timely and compelling. Having been a single male parent myself for a number of years, I was most definitely sympathetic with Rufus' sometimes questionable concerns. Mentorship definitely has a place in American society, and none of us can afford to fail at it."[172] The reader was emotionally connected to the hero and his circumstances that produced personal meaning. Along these same lines, readers commented on how true to life the novel was and how realistic the character traits were for the hero and heroine: "Rufus definitely qualifies for a KISS Award! He has the sterling qualities all heroes should have, without seeming so perfect that he's unattainable. Naomi comes across as a well-rounded character with justifiable reason for being cautious about a serious relationship."[173] Other readers commented on the sense of morality of the novel, the love for the personalities, the dignity and class of the characters, and their excitement for Black love stories, writing, "I am so thrilled that the Kensington people 'gave us a chance."[174]

As I continue to reflect on why Black women read romance, the idea of emotional connection to the story, the characters, and the social issues remains at the forefront of my study. Many people take for granted the significance of seeing oneself in literature or seeing one's

[172] Greg Domingue, Letter to Gwynne Forster, 1995. Box 4, Folder 15, PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403.
[173] Jeanette Bates, Letter to Gwynne Forster, 12 November 1995. Box 4, Folder 15, PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403.
[174] Cora Johnson Lewis, Letter to Gwynne Forster, 9 July 1996. Box 4, Folder 15, PCL MS 195 Gwynne Forster Papers. Browne Popular Culture Library, BGSU University Libraries, Bowling Green, OH 43403.

community represented in history. The sense of belonging, inclusion, and of simply feeling seen is an exhilarating experience for readers. I do, however, continue to question the politics of representation and visibility as it concerns Black romance and its history. Black love stories are still trapped within the confines of traditional genre romance that continues to be exclusionary to the diversity of many Black communities. Visibility in the genre is not enough when the genre was built to exclude Black readers. I do not profess to understand the mechanics of literary canon, but I do feel as if having a genre of our own should mean that we have the agency to break the rules – to actually establish a genre of our own making. Arabesque novels of the 1990s set the precedent for Black romances of the twenty-first century. The authors of these novels explored themes of social uplift, community outreach, gender ideology, and Black women's empowerment. They expressed through their work that love relationships, based on honesty and communication, were achievable and that Black love extended beyond partnerships to Black communities. Most importantly, I think, Arabesque novels gave Black women an autonomous space to explore pleasure and desire in the public sphere.

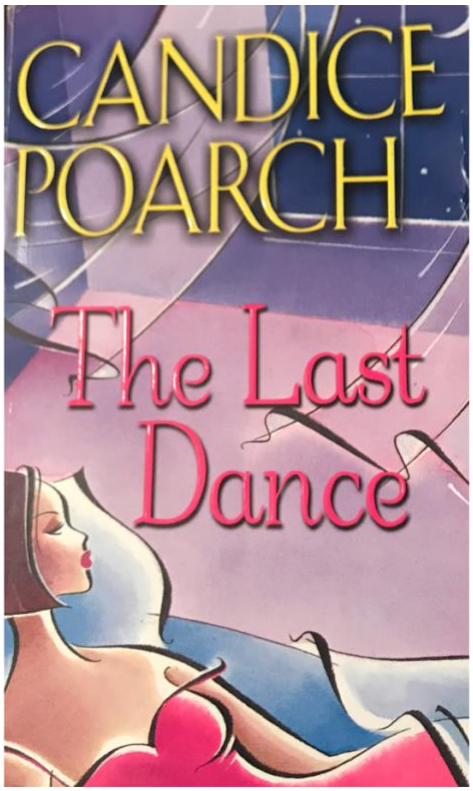

Figure 15. Candice Poarch, *The Last Dance* (BET Books, 2001)

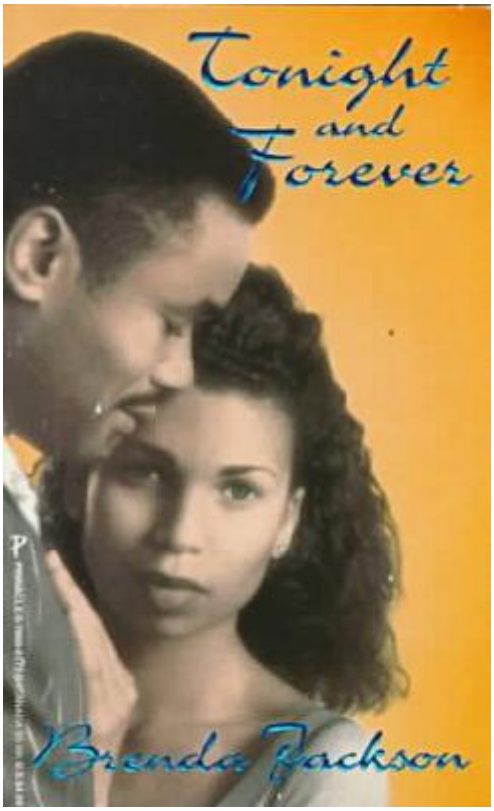

Figure 16. Brenda Jackson, *Tonight and Forever* (Pinnacle Books, 1995)

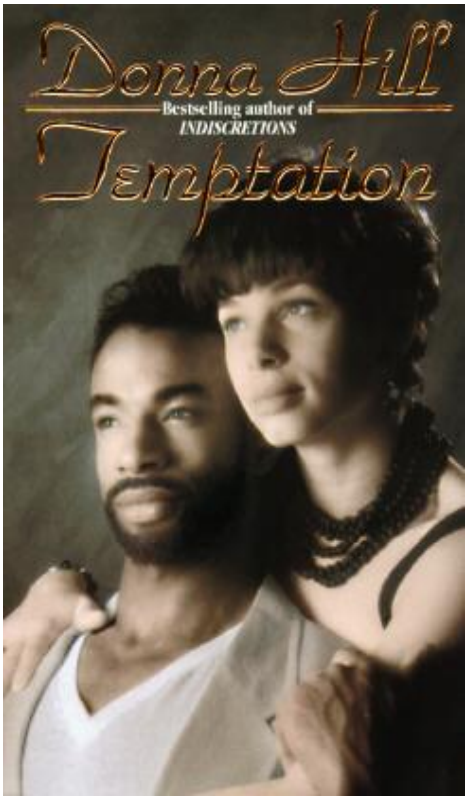

Figure 17. Donna Hill, *Temptation* (Pinnacle Books, 1994)

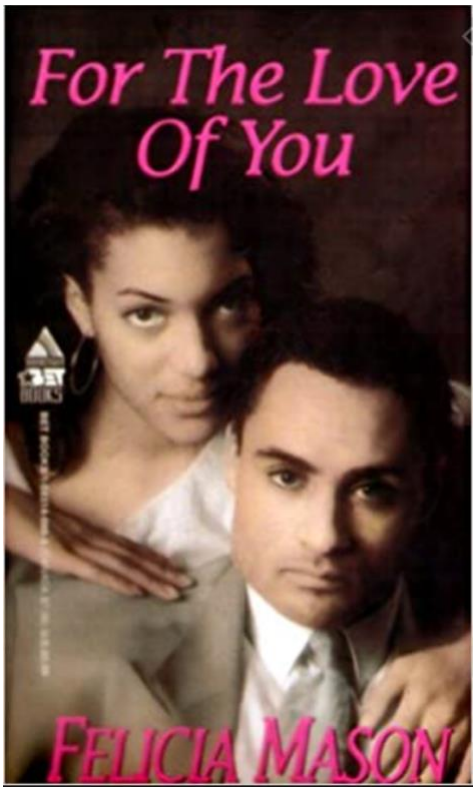

Figure 18. Felicia Mason, *For The Love Of You* (BET Books, 1994)

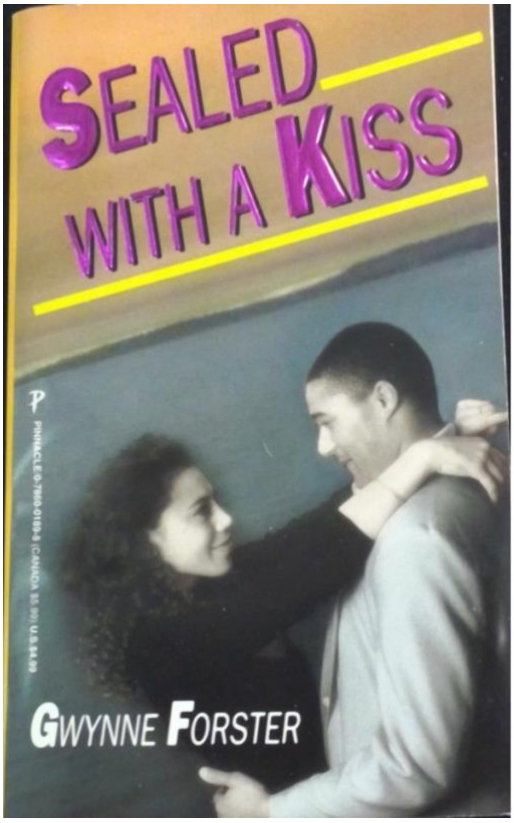

Figure 19. Gwynne Forster, *Sealed With A Kiss* (Pinnacle Books, 1995)

Conclusion

African American romances offer more than love stories to their readers. They offer an awareness of overlooked Black histories, greater understandings and representations of Blackness, connections to diverse Black communities, and most importantly, joy. African American literature is often equated to stories of pain and trauma, possibly because our histories are filled with struggle and hardship but also because Black creators are dependent on the financial backing of major publishing houses that only want a single narrative of Black life. As we constantly see in film and television, Black pain and trauma sells. Romance novels balance that pain with joy and reflect the resiliency that comes from Black love – love for our culture, our people, our communities, our neighborhoods, and even our differences. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, visibility within a structure that has historically over-looked and misrepresented Black life and experiences is not true representation. It does not create necessary change to the structure. A genre of our own – such as Black romance – should mean that Black editors, writers, and readers have the agency to break the rules, to actually establish a genre of their own making. This has yet to happen in traditional romance publishing.

The State of Black Romance Publishing

In the introduction of this study, I described the demographics of the overall publishing industry as majority white, female, heterosexual, cis-gender, and able-bodied. The exclusion of people who do not fall into those categories hinders the types of stories that are bought and sold by major publishing houses. For Black writers, even when they are represented in traditional publishing, their financial backing is considerably less than their white counterparts. The summer of 2020 exposed this truth through the circulation of a Twitter hashtag called #PublishingPaidMe, where prominent Black authors shared the amount of their advances paid to

them by publishers. The hashtag was created by fantasy novelist L.L. McKinney as a way "to highlight the disparity between what's paid to non-Black authors versus Black authors."[175] Black authors across all genres of fiction and nonfiction shared advances that were drastically lower than their white counterparts despite their overwhelming popularity, success, and acclaim in a variety of publishing markets. Black romance authors are included in these racial disparities.

Black romance in traditional publishing is stagnant. Since the launch of Pinnacle Books' Arabesque line in 1994, only two other exclusively Black category romance lines have been produced by major publishers. In 2005, Harlequin purchased BET Books and formed Kimani Press, an imprint that published romance, women's fiction, and non-fiction that was aimed at Black readers. From this imprint came Kimani Romance in 2006, a line dedicated to Black romance that was discontinued in 2018. Kensington Publishing Corporation, the parent company of Pinnacle Books, remains a leader in publishing Black romance. In 2000, it developed an imprint called Dafina that focuses on commercial fiction and non-fiction that centers race and cultural identity.[176] After twenty years, the imprint is still in service and continues to publish the pioneers of Black romance alongside newcomers to the genre.

Their success is modeled after Pinnacle Books' Arabesque in that their editorial teams are headed by Black women who work alongside Black women writers to create cohesive experiences in Black storytelling for predominantly Black female readers. In 2018, journalist Bim Adewunmi interviewed a trio of Black women at Kensington Publishing that she describes

[175] Mary Louise Kelly, "#PublishingPaidMe: Authors Share Their Advances To Expose Racial Disparities," NPR (NPR, June 8, 2020), https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872470156/-publishingpaidme-authors-share-their-advances-to-expose-racial-disparities.
[176] "About Dafina," Kensington Publishing Corporation, April 23, 2020, https://www.kensingtonbooks.com/pages/dafina/about-dafina/.

as challenging the old, predominantly white narratives of popular romance: author Alyssa Cole, senior editor Esi Sogah, and art director Kris Noble.[177] Together, these women published a trilogy of Black historical romances, called *The Loyal League* (see Figure 20-22), in what Adewunmi calls a "black on all sides" mainstream publishing project. From the novel's protagonist, via the author, to the editor, to the art director who created the cover art, there was a forged chain of Black women as decision-makers. This project expanded on the precedent set by Arabesque, and the success of *The Loyal League* novels shows the value in this type of inclusion of Black women in mainstream romance publishing.

[177] Bim Adewunmi, "Meet The Black Women Upending The Romance Novel Industry," (BuzzFeed News, May 1, 2018), https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/bimadewunmi/meet-the-black-women-upending-the-romance-novel-industry.

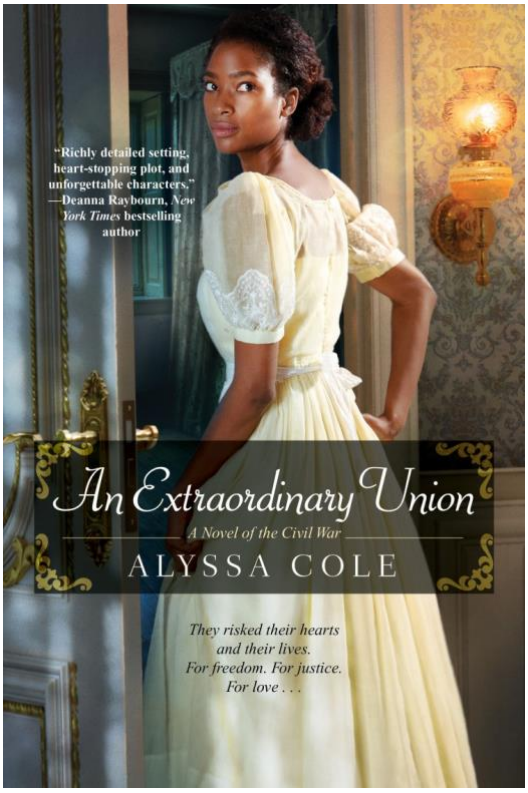

Figure 20. Alyssa Cole, *An Extraordinary Union* (Kensington Books, 2017)

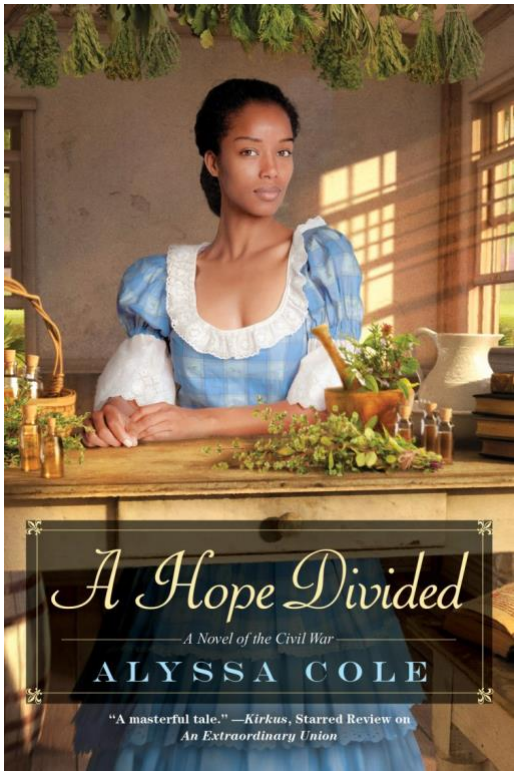

Figure 21. Alyssa Cole, *A Hope Divided* (Kensington Books, 2017)

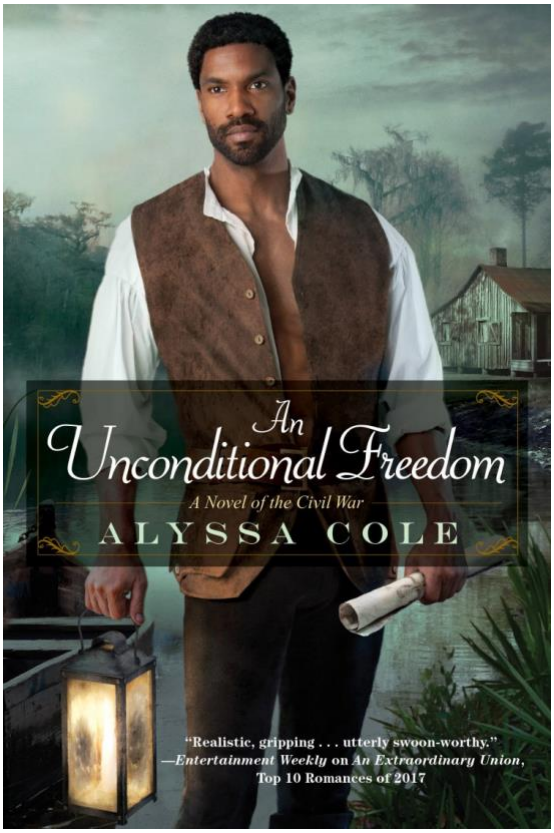

Figure 22. Alyssa Cole, *An Unconditional Freedom* (Kensington Books, 2019)

The Rise of Self-Publishing for Black Romance

For a long time, self-publishing in Black romance has been a proven avenue for Black authors in reaching a Black readership and having the freedom to explore diverse storylines. This avenue has allowed authors to step over the boundaries of traditional romance narratives. Zane, an African American author of Black erotic fiction turned to self-publishing in the 1990s to tell stories that explicitly expressed and centered a Black female sexuality that traditional publishers were not yet ready to publish. The author set a precedent in self-publishing that highlighted the entrepreneurial aspects of effective branding and marketing for niche markets of readers. Her novels crossed all markets of readers, no matter the ethnic and age group, and drew the attention of traditional publishers. These publishers then developed an interest in the types of stories she was telling because she proved, through her personal branding and marketing, that she was a strong storyteller, and that erotic fiction could sell.

Self-publishing was, and continues to be, an avenue for authors to reach traditional publishing, based on the success of their novels. But not all authors aim for the backing of mainstream publishers when they have more control over their narratives through self-publishing. In recent years, author Rebekah Weatherspoon has gained popularity with her Black and interracial romance novels that are inclusive of varying sexualities, cultural identities, body types, gender ideologies, and socioeconomic backgrounds. She continues to grow her readership, particularly among Black women, because her stories move beyond the limitations of traditional, heterosexual romance narratives. Although she has recently signed with a major publisher, Kensington Publishing Corporation, her best-selling titles are all self-published and she continues to self-publish novels in conjunction with publishing traditionally. Further research into self-published Black romances is crucial in understanding and documenting the genre's

history. These novels are also valuable in the exploration of Black women's studies, especially as they explore narratives that center Black women's pleasurable sexuality and the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Romance Novels as Archival Records

Throughout my study of Black romance history, I have referred to symbolic annihilation and representational belonging in countering the documented whiteness that has shaped the romance industry and its history. Romance novels as archival records of Black history and culture serve as resources in the support of representational belonging. They are useful tools in exploring Black life beyond the single narrative of Black struggle. Romance storytelling balances Black pain and trauma with stories of joy and hope. Romance novels, like other works of African American literature written by Black women, are memory narratives – an individual's perceptive and felt interpretation of social life that is subjective, specific, and partial to national and institutional histories.[178] They are critical acts of documentation, and following historian Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's reasoning, they are the combination of storytelling, autobiography, and testimonio that have a central place in history and theory and have considerable representational reparations for past exclusions and silences.[179] By nature, romance novels written by Black women are autobiographical and fit the criteria of autoethnography

[178] Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "A Living Archive of Desire: Teresita La Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History,* ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 114.
[179] Ibid., 116-117.

work. They are grounded in personal experience as well as broader socio-cultural contexts, and, like personal archives, they are emotional, subjective, and narrow in scope.[180]

Novels as archival records means taking a postmodern archival approach that focuses on the context behind the content and the power relationships that shape the documentary heritage and the document's structure.[181] These records are dynamic and serve multiple purposes for the communities they represent and are particularly advantageous in studying the redefinitions of Black womanhood and sexuality from 1980 to the present. By looking at the pleasure cultures of Black women created through romance fiction, my goal is to understand the stripped-down versions of African American women and their expression of desire within public spheres. Just as it is necessary to further understand the impact of self-published Black romances, it is also essential to understand the readers themselves. Without a contemporary, ethnographic study of Black romance readers to add to Black romance history's archival record, a gap in the scholarly research of the industry remains. My hope, in the continuation of my research with Black romances, is to conduct such a study in the hopes of adding to the scholarship of Black reader reception and response to romance fiction.

[180] Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, "From the sidelines to the center: reconsidering the potential of the personal in archives," *Archival Science* 18 (2018): 260, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9295-6.
[181] Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 25.

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