

Introduction to the Special Issue on Black Romance

Margo Hendricks and Julie E. Moody-Freeman

Published online: May 2022

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

About the Author: Margo Hendricks is Professor Emerita UC Santa Cruz. A recipient of a 2020-21 Folger Library Fellowship, she has received a number of academic grants and fellowships to support her writing. Co-editor (with Patricia Parker) of *Women, Race and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, Margo has published essays on Shakespeare, premodern critical race, early modern women, and whatever strikes her fancy. Her forthcoming book is *Race and Romance: Coloring the Past*. Other research projects include *Heliodorus' Daughters: Black Women and Romance* and *Shakespeare's Negress: An Academic Memoir. . . sort of*. Behind the pen name Elysabeth Grace, she is the author of the *Daughters of Saria* series and *For Your Heart Only* a Black romance contemporary novel.

Julie E. Moody-Freeman is the Director of the Center for Black Diaspora and an Associate Professor in the Department of African and Black Diaspora Studies at DePaul University. She is the co-editor of *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction, and the Speculative* and *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative*. Her scholarly essays on Belizean writer Zee Edgell have been published in *African Identities*, *Macomeré*, *Canadian Women Studies/les cahiers de la femme*, and *Seeking the Self-Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*. Her work on African American Romance has appeared in *Romance Fiction and American Culture* and *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Moody-Freeman is also the creator and host of the *Black Romance Podcast*, which is building an oral history on Black Romance writers.

Keywords: Black romance

How It Began

Introductions are, by their nature, signposts. Signposts that guide readers, provide informational cadences, and justify what falls between page one and page conclusion. Introductions usually layout the theoretical and intellectual path of an author's writing, whether in book or essay form. With scholarly collections, such as this one, an introduction usually provides the contextual need for the essays.

The origin for this journal's special issue began with the idea to create a podcast on Black romance with conversations on the history of writing and publishing popular romance. This podcast would be integrated into the Digital Public History Scholarship at the Center for Black Diaspora at DePaul University.[1] Julie intended the conversations with Black popular romance writers, industry experts, and romance scholars to document an oral history of Black popular romance. Questions shaping these conversations included: What were the editorial guidelines for novel submissions? How did editorial guidelines change as writers transitioned from Pinnacle Books published by Kensington Publishing Corp., which first published the Arabesque line of African American romance novels published between 1994 and 1996, to BET books and Kimani Press formed by Harlequin Enterprises? Part one of the interviews was meant to use the conversations with editors and writers who published their first novels in the 1990s. The aim was to document the early history of the production and publication of African American Romance. Part two of the podcast was to document the second generation of romance writers and editors. As guests were being booked for the podcast in May 2020, Julie began having conversations with Eric Selinger. He supported the project and advised that this oral history project was too historically important to remain only in podcast form and should be published. Therefore, Julie wrote a proposal and submitted it to the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. Once the proposal was accepted, Eric solicited Margo Hendricks to co-edit the issue with Julie. Margo brought an expansive vision to the original proposal. This saw the issue develop from the curation of contextualized transcribed interviews to a critical issue that brought in an interdisciplinary host of romance writers/scholars who used the podcast interviews as a starting point for their academic essays focused on a specific romance writer and their novels.

The Special Issue Invitation and Objectives

One of the troubling absences in the academic study of the romance genre is the sparsity of critical scholarship on late twentieth and twenty-first century Black romance. For example, in the early 1990s, Vivian Stephens worked diligently and astutely to shepherd Black romance into publication and into the hands of readers. While Black women authored romance novels, many did so behind pseudonyms and with white-centered romance storylines (the main characters were white). Stephens' efforts to change this narrative proved groundbreaking. While her relationship to traditional publishing became fraught, Stephens' legacy continues. Black romance authors she supported in turn extended that generosity of spirit to the next generation of authors. This special issue is

born of that generosity of spirit. The authors of the collection of essays received the following invitation to contribute:

We are writing to invite your contribution to a special Journal of Popular Romance Studies issue on Black Romance. The volume will consist of interviews with Black romance authors Vivian Stephens, Sandra Kitt, (Rochelle Alers), Brenda Jackson, Beverly Jenkins, Gwyneth Bolton, Alyssa Cole, and Rebekah Weatherspoon. We seek to pair these interviews with academic essays by Black scholars. A transcript of the author's interview will be provided as a starting point but we ask that your essay is shaped by your research/scholarly platform. We do encourage you to identify one or two text(s) you view as absolutely crucial to considerations of the author's canon. While we hope your essay considers the author in relation to the romance genre, reception and craft issues, the essay's narrative is yours.

For readers of this special issue, these seven romance authors are but the tip of the Black romance authorial iceberg. Their books have long engaged and redefined the relationship between a Black woman's body and sexuality, her economic and politic power, and her right to love and be loved. From the groundbreaking career of Vivian Stephens to the transformative and fluid writings of Rebekah Weatherspoon, Black romance has thrived despite an often dismissive or hostile romance community (here we are speaking of predominately white publishing and readership). What sustained Black romance throughout the 1990s and to this day are Black readers. What has not been evident over the past decade is an investment among romance scholars in the study of Black romance (and we would add BIPOC romance fiction in general). There is a difference between the "celebration" or bibliographic listing of Black romance authors and a critical engagement with Black romance novels themselves.

With the exception of Rita Dandridge and Julie Moody-Freeman, none of the academic writers are grounded in popular romance studies. They are romance authors and/or scholars working within African-American and African Diaspora fields. The essays published in this special issue of *JPRS* represent a disruption of this trend. Each paper reflects the scholar's longstanding relationship to Black romance as well as directing a critical eye at the author at the heart of the essay. Thus, the essays won't necessarily cohere to a specific discipline's concerns or, in all honesty, its mode of rhetoric. In other words, Natalie Tindall's discussion of Brenda Jackson's novels and career will not read the same as Jamee Pritchard's engagement with Rebekah Weatherspoon's romance fiction. What is also de-centered in the essays is the assumption of the readerly gaze. Whether acknowledged or not, studies of popular romance fiction implicitly center a white readership, which in turn fosters expectations about citational practices and field-specific authority.

This collection of essays reflects the practices of scholarly publication in that they are refereed submissions. Each essay underwent anonymous reviews and received recommendations, and the editors gratefully thank the readers for the thoughtfulness of their reports. This is a curated special issue; scholars were invited to contribute because it was important to both editors to center Black voices on the subject of Black romance authorship, Black romance genealogies, and Black romance fiction. We wanted to avoid the diffusion of Black romance into comparative analysis with non-Black romance fiction.

A Preview

In this issue's first essay, "Vivian Lorraine Stephens: Romance Pioneer," Rita B. Dandridge combines biography, literary analysis, and a study of production and political economy to document Vivian Stephens' contributions to a history of romance publishing. Using interviews, reviews, books, newspapers, magazine articles, textual analysis of notes to readers, and romance novels, she traces Vivian Stephens' historical impact in shaping Romance Publishing at Dell and Harlequin, and in Founding the Romance Writers of America.

In the second essay, "Her Bodyguard: Sandra Kitt's *The Color of Love* as a foundation text for BWWM romance," Piper Huguley positions Sandra Kitt's novel *Color of Love* as an early forerunner for what we now know as the Romance BWWM subgenre in which "skin color does not matter" and in which the black heroine is loved, protected and cherished. Huguley contextualizes her close readings using discussions of interracial marriage during slavery and Jim Crow segregation as well using history on the production and publication of novels by Black women writers in the 1990s.

Using critical race theory and communication, Natalie Tindall's "Black Romance Authors and Community Cultural Wealth: A Case Study of Brenda Jackson's Career," explores how Brenda Jackson successfully built herself as a brand in a publishing industry that excluded Black writers. Tindall incorporates autoethnography, author interviews, and social communication theory to study the case of Brenda Jackson as a brand. She concludes that Jackson uses a "community cultural wealth model," which early in her career allowed her to establish relationships with her readers to create a fandom that existed outside the institutional romance industry.

Margo Hendricks' essay "Against Odds: Beverly Jenkins' *Indigo* and Black Historical Romance" offers a close reading of Beverly Jenkins' historical romance *Indigo*. In it, she argues that while Jenkins' depiction of the politics of class and colorism in the novel's pre Civil war setting affects her characters' lives, her novel does not center the central love story through the lens of "Black trauma porn." Hendricks uses interviews with Jenkins and literary criticism to instead illuminate the ways *Indigo* reveals the burgeoning love between Hester and Galen and challenges notions of "historical authenticity" that "elide or erase truths" about enslaved and free Black people's lives in pre and post emancipation. Hendricks argues that Jenkins' interviews and novel bears witness to the reality that Black people do love.

"Freedom's Epilogue: Love as Freedom in Alyssa Cole's Historical Romances," the fifth essay in this issue, continues the focus on Black love in historical romance fiction. Nicole M Jackson argues that Alyssa Cole's "politicization" of Black love in her novellas *Be Not Afraid* and *That Could Be Enough* compels readers to focus on the interiority of enslaved people's complex inner lives, which are filled with love, pain, and hopes for freedom in whatever form it comes during the Revolutionary era. Therefore, Cole's historical romances act in contradistinction to traditional historical narratives that have represented enslaved peoples as one dimensional, dehumanized and devoid of joy and love.

Jamee Prichard's essay "Reading the Black Romance: Exploring Black Sexual Politics in the Romance Fiction of Rebekah Weatherspoon" weaves personal narrative, author interviews, Black romance history, and Black feminist criticism to unpack how

Weatherspoon's representations of Black men and women differ from those published in the 1990s. She argues that early Black romance represented Black women in deference to and in defense of Black men, whose images were denigrated in the popular media and culture. She concludes that Weatherspoon's erotic novels challenge the "Strong Black woman" image and center Black women's joy, care, vulnerability, and sexual pleasure. Whether BDSM, heterosexual, or polyamorous, stories of empathetic and loving relationships between Black women and men show them in partnerships, and Black masculinity is not predicated on women's subordination.

Julie E Moody-Freeman's essay "Romance, Hip-Hop Feminism, and Black Love: From Theory to Praxis" closes out the issue by examining Gwyneth Bolton's 2010 romance novel *Make It Last Forever* through Black Feminist frameworks. Moody-Freeman argues that the novel is an expansion of Bolton's Black feminist work, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, written as academic Gwendolyn Pough, in which she argues that Black feminist criticism should "come down from its ivory tower" to engage how feminism and rap simultaneously challenge sexism and discuss how the Hip-Hop generation talks about Black love and pleasure. Therefore, the essay closely analyzes the novel using Hip-Hop feminisms' articulation of "Pleasure Politics," and uncovers the rhetorical devices at play in the romance novel's narrative that advocate for Black women's sex positivity, humor, sass, and pleasure. Additionally, the essay shows how the novel revises conventional notions of Black masculinity as violent and unloving, and it identifies the pedagogical implications of using the romance novel in a classroom to engage in discussions Black people's lived reality with anti-Black racism, policing, and violence.

Enjoy

[1] Thanks to the Center for Black Diaspora and the Dean's Office in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at DePaul University for supporting this podcast from its early inception. Thanks to Dean Guillermo Vásquez de Velasco, Molly Bench, and Susanna Pagliaro. Juelle Daley's sound editing and the research, transcribing, and copyediting that Jennifer Ogwumike and Jessica Williams provided at the Center for Black Diaspora helped to make this podcast and journal possible.