

The Religious Work of Beverly Jenkins's Black Historical Romance

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Abstract: This article argues that Beverly Jenkins's Black historical romance is religious. In offering this analysis, this article draws attention to a long-standing African American religious historiographic tradition known as chronicling. From Maria Stewart to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and beyond, Black chroniclers have written Black history with the sacred aim of rehabilitating Black historical consciousness: rewriting the past to empower the present and reimagine the future. Jenkins innovates in and amplifies the religiosity of Black chronicling through the erotic, a powerful religious resource embraced by Black women theologians, ethicists, and writers. This article draws on Black womanist and Black feminist scholarship to show how Jenkins centers desire, interiority, and pleasure within Black women's moral agency and affirms Black women's embodied flourishing. Bringing together African American historiography and popular romance studies with Black women's theological ethics and literature, this article examines Jenkins's novels, her formation as a writer, and her reader reception to shine a new light on the many facets of Black popular romance. Jenkins's Black historical romance radically continues the religious legacy of chronicling Black history, effecting personal and communal transformation, liberation, and repair with the truth "of who [Black people] are and...were" (Jenkins in Amos et al.).

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Introduction

During *RomBkPod*'s July 2020 interview of Beverly Jenkins, podcaster cohost Danielle Amos got emotional when it was her turn to speak: "This isn't my question, but I just wanted to let you know that I was . . . staunchly . . . I'm getting teary-eyed thinking about it—but . . . I didn't want to read historicals because . . . I felt like everything in our past was pain" (Amos, et al.). Amos tearfully describes how reading Jenkins's Black historical romance changed her mind, not only about Black history but about herself. She voices what many Black women readers have said—that Jenkins's romances are more than just stories, and her history more than mere backdrop (Bell). It is an observation Jenkins herself embraces. A librarian-turned-author who used to read copies of *The Journal of Negro History* on her lunch hour, Jenkins writes Black historical and contemporary romance, penning her stories with particular sensibilities and aims. Rather than Jane Austen's Regency novels or mid-century mass-market white genre fiction, Jenkins claims a Black literary lineage starting with the earliest female-authored slave narratives, speeches, and novels, citing Mary Prince, Maria Stewart, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Pauline E. Hopkins alongside modern historians like Benjamin Quarles (see Jenkins, "A Short History"; "RWA2016 Keynote"). Like some of her chosen forbears, Jenkins uses love to mark time and give it shape and meaning. Like others, she is concerned with righting the historical record. Like all, she endeavors to present a story that changes common views of Black people, presents Black history as American history, and expands what we think is possible about our past, present, and future.

Hers is, I aver, religious work. This article argues that Jenkins's work is best understood not only by the category "Black romance" for which she gained fame, but more specifically within the genre of *chronicle*. Although Jenkins's novels are exemplary specimens of the romance genre, the historical work she does distinguishes and defines her creative project. Throughout her oeuvre, Jenkins engages in what I refer to as Black chronicling, a form of Black historical writing that realizes the religious import, sacred place, and ethical function of Black history. I build my terminology from Laurie Maffly-Kipp, who argues that African American writers across the long nineteenth century—largely Protestant, Northern men—produced race histories as "a new form of chronicle" (7). This popular historical mode, dating to ninth-century Byzantium, is discernible across the diversity of nineteenth-century Black print. As in the ancient world, chronicles in Black America function as counternarratives to official historical accounts, creating communal histories that incorporate religious, racial, and political themes to locate audiences in "a linear narrative of descent" amid divine and destined movements in history (7). African American women authored distinctively gendered chronicles in which "women's experiences [are] a crucial element of the plot" (236). In formats ranging from speeches, pageants, and women's club writings to poetry, biographies, and novels, nineteenth-century Black women like Stewart, Harper, and Hopkins utilized "historical allusion and argument . . . to make claims about" Black life in the present (248). Chronicling new forms of history in "'female' literary genres," these writers re-envisioned history itself and "implicitly challenged" the prevailing authors of Black collective identity, Black male clergy (251).

While scholarship focuses on an earlier era, chronicling is not limited to the past. Black chronicling is an ongoing practice by which Black history gains sacred power through the establishment of a collective narrative. Maffly-Kipp cites Reverend Jeremiah Wright's preaching as contemporary chronicling; however, we might equally look—as with earlier

Black women chroniclers—beyond the pulpit and outside spaces traditionally gendered male. Specializing in nineteenth-century Black history, Jenkins has penned over thirty historical romances among her more than fifty individual works of fiction. Her romances vibrantly bring Black history to life, depicting actual diverse backgrounds, occupations, education, experiences, ethnicities, and aspirations of Black Americans within the cisgendered heterosexual historical romance.[1] Jenkins, one of the first mainstream-published authors of BIPOC historical romance, is also one of the only to consistently write Black couples rather than interracial. She uses historical romance to explore the expansive diversity *within* Blackness and is committed to the central depiction of Black women and men—and, more to the point, Black women *with* Black men, a historically revolutionary act.[2]

Jenkins's Black historical heroines include self-emancipated and formerly enslaved Underground Railroad conductors in 1850s Michigan fighting the Fugitive Slave Act (*Indigo; Belle*), freeborn and formerly enslaved schoolteachers and community leaders in Reconstruction-era New Orleans and Kansas (*Rebel; Through the Storm; Night Song*), ranchers in 1880s Texas and Wyoming Territory (*The Taming of Jessie Rose; Wild Rain*), a newspaper correspondent chronicling a westward-bound covered wagon caravan of Black mail-order brides (*Topaz*), a sex worker in 1880s San Francisco (*Destiny's Surrender*), an 1880s Afro-Cuban rebel (*Destiny's Captive*), a Revolutionary War spy in 1770s Boston (*Midnight*), a formerly incarcerated Black Seminole train robber on parole in 1890s Philadelphia (*Wild Sweet Love*), a wrongly incarcerated Black-Indigenous Kaw survivor escaping a vigilante mob (*Night Hawk*), and more. Her Black historical heroes include Civil War Union veterans (*Vivid; Forbidden*), Union operatives and Reconstruction government military officials (*Through the Storm; Winds of the Storm; Rebel*), Black and Seminole US marshals and outlaws (*Topaz; The Taming of Jessi Rose; Something Like Love*), kidnapped ("shanghaied") Afro-Mexican and Black shipping magnates and businessmen (*Destiny's Captive* 4, 111; *Midnight* 275, 286), freeborn and self-emancipated journalists in Michigan and Wyoming (*Jewel; Wild Rain*), a hog farmer raising his two nieces in 1880s Kansas (*A Chance at Love*), a gun-toting and Bible-quoting western bounty hunter and widower who is the Afro-Scottish grandson of a Scottish laird (*Night Hawk*), a 1770s Franco-Haitian abolitionist pirate who is the illegitimate son of a French duke (*Captured*), a Black Creole-Cheyenne engineer businessman (*Before the Dawn*), and more.

Jenkins adds dimension and individuation, depth and breadth, to what is often a reductive and warped portrait of Black historical actors as "just slaves" without location, identity, personality, or biography.[3] As will be shown in short order, Jenkins's work is not a rejection of slavery but a refusal of its terms. Slavery tries to annihilate the person. Jenkins recovers precisely this.

As is definitional for popular romance, Jenkins's stories all end happily with "emotional justice" and the protagonists together (qtd. in Roach 165). Yet, how that happy ending ensues in the text and what it facilitates in the world is something beyond the love story of two characters—something related specifically to the larger religious work of Black history. By religion, I do not mean the role of churches, denominations, or doctrines.[4] Rather, I mean what African American religious historian Albert J. Raboteau invoked in writing "I felt that in the recovery of this history lay the restoration of my past, my self, and my people" (325). I base my claim for religiosity with specific attention to the ways that Jenkins marshals Black history to advance an idea of community, as well as an embedded

notion of self. As did Frances Harper with the first Black historical romance *Iola Leroy* in 1892, Jenkins uses romance to make larger claims about Black history and uses history to make larger claims about Black love and people.

In arguing that Jenkins's historical romance is religious, I shift and expand how scholars have perceived the categorical conjunction of romance and religion. The work on romance and religion tends to see what is generically theological via white Christendom. So, for example, there is scholarship that analyzes romance's divinization of love as omnipotent and eternal and perceives in the requisite happily-ever-after an eschatological fundament. There is work tracing a religio-historical genealogy of the romance narrative and work identifying a romance arc within religious narratives, as well as work that examines religious subgenres of popular romance, like inspirational and Amish romance, and scholarship examining the romance reading practices of religiously-identified readers. Many arrive at a latent claim that, insofar as it ritually expresses communal values, romance *is* religion.[5]

I add to this growing collection of scholarly observation a reading attentive to Black women's religious ethics, romance, history, and literature. I bring critical analysis of the religious function of Black history, *eros* in theology, and Black feminists' and womanists' embrace of the erotic as a sacred form of personal and communal empowerment. I join the generations of Black romance readers, scholars, and critics who uplift the under-explored significance of Black romance. I am particularly indebted to Rita B. Dandridge's trailblazing work on African American historical romance in general and Jenkins in particular (*Black Women's Activism; "Love Prevailed"*). However, I depart from Dandridge by drawing on theological and Black feminist and womanist traditions, which interpret *eros* not in conflict with *agape* but as collaborator in its pursuit of justice, asserting the erotic as an intimate part of Black women's embodied flourishing. My argument proceeds by examining Jenkins's work, her formation as a writer, and her pedagogical impact. As demonstrated in the fan cultures around her work, Black women's affective responses showcase how Jenkins writes transformative stories accepted as collective narration that reconstructs a history, restores meaning, refutes Black inferiority, and shapes the future, to paraphrase Maffly-Kipp's description of chronicles (3). Prioritizing reader and writer commentary alongside texts, I demonstrate how Jenkins innovates in the tradition of chronicling Black history for liberation and truth.

Encountering Chronicle: A Reader's Transformation

Understanding the religiosity of Jenkins's chronicling requires thinking with her novels alongside reader experiences and the material cultures of reading, including non-reading, that surround her books. Like many Black romance authors, Jenkins has been sustained by a core readership of Black women. For these readers, like podcaster Amos, community and self are built forward from her historical romances. Amos's emotional testimony continues:

[I]t was really hard for me to read [historicals]. Then, when I read your book and I'm like, that's not—everything about Black people is not pain, and we did have joy in our lives . . . I thought back . . . If we didn't have joy and romance, I wouldn't be here. . . . My grandparents were married, my great-grandparents

were married, and, without that love, I wouldn't be here, myself [her voice breaks] wouldn't be here. . . . I just really want to thank you, 'cause you really changed my perspective on what Black history is . . . [she cries] [I]n the midst of all this, I read *Vivid* . . . and it just really hit home that we are here, and we've been here, and **we've been moving towards a future that we deserve**. (bold emphasis mine)

Jenkins responds,

I understand. You got me crying too, girl. No shame in our pain. No shame in it. But what you're saying about the pain . . . that's seemingly all . . . Hollywood and all of that—that's the only focus, is our pain. And like you said, if we—**we wouldn't have survived had everything been about pain. You know—we came home to somebody who loved us**. And that gave us the strength to *get up* the next morning. . . .

But you know—and I get that a *lot* from my readers, especially in the beginning, where . . . I had readers, a woman at my beauty shop who was saying, "I don't read your books because, you know, that didn't happen to us," and I'm like, "**Really? Really?**" **You know—we are more than our pain**. I call it **pain porn**. I would like to see some stories—yes, I'm shamelessly saying I would like to see my stuff on the screen—in order to give people a **truer version of who we are**, and **who we were**, and how *clever* our ancestors were, and how *intelligent*, and how *strong*. . . . I understand the tears. . . . And I thank you for that tribute. (Amos et al., bold emphasis mine)

This off-script exchange offers a glimpse of just what sort of work Jenkins's Black historical romances do for Black women, Black history, and Jenkins herself. Amos's tribute reflects how she receives Jenkins involved in the work of chronicling, "using knowledge of the past to make claims about contemporary community life" (Maffly-Kipp 248). These claims have personal and direct meaning, resulting in Amos's epiphany: "we *are* here, we've *been* here, and we've been moving towards a future we deserve." Present tense dominates for Amos, conveying that what Jenkins achieves as contemporary chronicler is nothing less than the rehabilitation of historical consciousness. Such rehabilitation is not simply a feature of or in the text, but a change in the reader that the chronicle seeks to effect. Hopkins's 1902 *Of One Blood* "was not a formal history, but it made use of and revised history to stress the obligation of African Americans to a holy and transhistorical community" (248). Amos's epiphany reflects a similar work—her revised historical understanding reveals an obligation of history, heritage, and self. Links are reified and made by the chronicler (Jenkins) through the chronicle (*Vivid*), resulting in Amos's "changed . . . perspective on what Black history is." This perspective is itself also a duty. To know Black history is to know it as communal and transhistorical: as present ("we *are* here"), past ("we've *been* here"), and destined ("a future that we deserve"). Amos has a responsibility *from* her ancestors *to* the present and future.

In turn, Jenkins's response to Amos shows the rehabilitated historical consciousness to be a core aim of her writing practice. Her brief comment on the woman in her beauty

shop offers insight into the functioning of her novels as chronicle. To this woman's declaration that she did not read Jenkins's novels because "that [presumably, romance] didn't happen to us," Jenkins voices a double interrogative: "Really? *Really?*" There is a layered quality to the open-endedness of "Really?," which amplifies in its doubling. Her rhetorical query interrogates the accuracy of the woman's view and the neglect that such a view displays. Jenkins states that she seeks to intervene in and reorient historical narratives of Black people away from the totality of pain and towards the fuller, "truer" picture of Black intelligence, strength, love, and perseverance. Notable is the centered subject of this portrait: with the exception of one explicit naming of "our ancestors," Jenkins asserts a "we" ("we wouldn't have survived," "we are more than our pain," "who we are, and who we were"). The conversation and debate in which she is engaged is not simply one of historical accuracy pertaining to a past people, but one regarding an "us" that is both historic and here and now. Jenkins's unnamed interlocutor speaks this language, as the woman's own protest is made wholly within its collective meaning: "that didn't happen to us." The woman's resistance exhibits her understanding that Jenkins's romances pertain to and make claims upon an "us," claims she rejects. Her refusal shows that a transhistorical communal understanding—a sense of chronicle—is already at work in how Jenkins's novels are being seen and circulating in community, even by those who do not read them. Embracing and picking up this interpretive thread, Jenkins's "Really?" questions the woman's jaundiced views about "who we are" and "who we were," as well as her failure to perceive the linkages therein. Jenkins pinpoints an epistemological neglect, which signals a larger moral failure: the dereliction of the obligations of a history; the breakdown, in a sense, of truth.

The unnamed woman is a foil for Amos. It is the integration of truth, comprising the proper functioning of chronicle, that effects Amos's tears in recalling her experience reading *Vivid*, taking truth in the Morrisonian sense, where the crucial divide lies not between truth and fiction but between truth and fact.[6] *Vivid* tells the story of the intrepid Dr. Viveca "Vivid" Lancaster, a female doctor descended from the Afro-Mexican founders of Los Angeles. In 1876, Vivid travels from California to serve the fictional Black community of Grayson Grove, Michigan, locking horns and hearts with the town's mayor, Nate Grayson. Through Dr. Lancaster, Jenkins recovers the little-known history of the ceiling-breaking, nineteenth-century Black female physicians who were the first Black women, and in some cases the first women, "to practice medicine in some states," and also the first practicing doctors in some counties, "bringing healthcare to areas that had none" (Amos et al.). Like chroniclers Harper and Stewart, Jenkins "valorize[s] the deeds of females" and "use[s] interpretation of the past . . . for the contestation of female rights and privileges" (Maffly-Kipp 248). Having expected the "Dr. V. Lancaster" his suffragist aunt sent for to be male, Mayor Grayson expresses no small amount of consternation at Vivid's arrival, initially rebuffing her claim to be Dr. Lancaster. Suffragette conventions, heated discussions of women's rights and roles, and, naturally, a good deal of tension—political, sexual, and other—shape the novel. Jenkins also depicts the nineteenth-century prominence of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which Amos, who has AME clergy relatives, appreciates.

Yet it is not the recovery of the Black church or certain factoids that provokes Amos's tears. It is the recovery of herself. This recuperation is closely tied to and facilitated by the detailed profusion of facts of Black history, but is at a second remove from that data.

What moves Amos to tears is how this communal past has present meaning in the most existential of ways. Her voice breaks when she locates herself as beneficiary and implication of history: “*myself* wouldn’t be here.” Her very being testifies to the historical claims being made, which are not simply about what Black people did but, per Jenkins, who Black people are and were.

Within Jenkins’s detailed depictions of nineteenth-century Black life, then, reside the transhistorical truths of Black interiority. Jenkins conveys these in numerous ways: first, by privileging a Black gaze, which shapes everything from the Afro-centric spectrum of body, color, and phenotype defining beauty across her oeuvre to intra-racial political sensibilities to the complex moral characters that populate her Black communities—Black people are victors, villains, victims, and more, inhabiting multiple roles.[7] Jenkins also communicates Black interiority by building a romance through alternating the heroine’s and hero’s perspectives, a common tactic in romance novels, yet used here to showcase the depth and diversity of Black experience, varying by gender, class, region, status, and more. For instance, the distinct perspectives and emotional responses of the heroine and hero in *Night Song*, Jenkins’s 1994 debut novel, reflect their differing backgrounds and familial experiences as free and formerly enslaved. Self-emancipated Buffalo Soldier Chase Jefferson’s Union Army uniform is for him a masculine badge of Black distinction and self-making. For the freeborn, Oberlin-educated schoolteacher Cara Lee Henson, who as a child witnessed her grandfather’s lynching by racist Union soldiers who disbelieved his assertion that he was free, the Union blue is an article of trauma. Jenkins has stated that she writes different characters to represent aspects of Black history; both Black military service and Black suffering at the hands of Union soldiers are part of this history (Moody-Freeman). In addition, the institutionalized sexual violence of slavery, experiences of familial separation, and powerlessness to claim one’s own children shape Chase, informing the relationship in ways that communicate the heartbreaking yet utterly commonplace nature of these realities.

A third way Jenkins transmits Black interiority as transhistorical truth is by situating white supremacy as a background while foregrounding Black dignity and love. For example, *Vivid* opens with a demeaning Jim Crow encounter on Vivid’s cross-country train trip, which references Ida B. Wells’s infamous encounter with railroad racism. The reader experiences this encounter through Vivid’s internal monologue as she struggles with public humiliation and decides how to react. Narrative control is filtered through Vivid, rather than her racist tormentors. Additionally, throughout *Vivid*, Union veteran Nate Grayson battles memory-induced night terrors from being buried alive by Confederate soldiers at Fort Pillow. Jenkins’s inclusion of this detail is itself a Black chronicling move. Whereas some historians question the veracity of Black accounts of Confederate barbarity at Fort Pillow, Jenkins draws from and highlights those very experiences in her romance.[8] Her privileging of Black experiences of war—and rumors of war—centers Black historical memory as an ethical move, foregrounding Black interiors over and against that which would obscure them, be it racial violence or historiography.[9] Vivid’s and Grayson’s interiority, dignity, and developing love take center stage amidst these and other challenges.

In placing the historical premium on Black interiority, Jenkins, like other Black writers, positions the interior as the site where Black history happens, shaping the story that is told.[10] However, as chronicler, Jenkins also locates the source of historical agency

in that interior, and she implicates and engages the reader in that happening. Black interiority, love, and dignity form the greater historical recovery that eclipses racism to move and cement the plot; Black interiority, not racism, is the “Unmoved Mover” of history. The reader is brought inside this historiographic view. This is why the transhistorical “we” is such an important repetition for Jenkins, and it is understood and articulated by readers and non-readers in her audience. In a Jenkins romance, Black interiority is not just recuperated as content for historical narrative but is the epistemic mechanism for how the reader comes to know history and truth—through the recovery of herself.

It is in these transhistorical threads, and the web of meaning and purpose they craft to cradle the reader and guide her community, that the religiosity of this chronicling tradition can be found. The religious work of *Vivid* lies in the way it orients the Black female reader to her history and her self, effecting transformation within an ethic of repair. This transformation is a dual dismantling of white supremacy as the defining frame for Black history and Black women’s lives: for Vivid in the novel, as Jenkins establishes her inherent worth as the center of historical gravity, and for the reader, as she comes to see this truth in herself. The happily-ever-after (HEA) ending that is the key genre convention of popular romance fiction is in a Jenkins romance an outgrowth of *this* foundation. While the HEA reigns triumphant as in any romance, it ensues here as the telos of Jenkins’s primordial grounding in Black interiority. As pertains to both text and reader, a Black woman’s interiority is the turf on which liberative narratives of self and community unfurl.

This dynamic holds true for the writer, as well. The connective tissue of self and community that enables Black chronicling is also found in the origins of Jenkins’s career as a romance novelist. Examining her entrée into writing historical romance illumines the role of Black interiority in her formation and her erotic innovation in writing African American history.

Writing Chronicle: The Making of a Black Historical Romance Writer

Whenever she discusses the origins of her first novel *Night Song*, Jenkins emphasizes that she was originally writing the story for herself and that, once she began seeking publication, she was unable to obtain a contract (Moody-Freeman). While these are not uncommon realities for first-time romance writers, and even seasoned writers face repeated rejection, the particularities of these features in Jenkins’s career reflect the liberative capacities of her work. In Jenkins’s narration of her writerly origins—where she began, what she used, and how she was received—I discern key themes that inscribe her in African American historiography and connect her to expansive religious modes of Black self-formation.

While in her thirties, happily married and working her dream job as a librarian at Michigan State University Graduate Library in the early 1980s, Jenkins began writing *Night Song* in the evenings after work as a story for herself. An avid reader since she was young, Jenkins enjoyed romance but found it partly lacking. When asked about the gap between what existed and what she wanted to see, Jenkins replied,

Somebody who looked like me; somebody who reflected my history. Because back then, when there were no women of color writing, you would see things

in *Romantic Times*, where, I don't even remember who it was, but [someone] said that there would be no Black people writing historicals because we *didn't have the talent—the history didn't have the scope*. And what? Really? So, you were up against those kinds of institutionalized racism, bigotry, ignorance. (Moody-Freeman, emphasis mine)

What started out as personal writing became an effort towards publication in the mid-1980s when Jenkins, then working at a major pharmaceutical company, mentioned her draft manuscript to a coworker, LaVerne St. George, who had recently published her first romance and was a member of Romance Writers of America (RWA). After reading the manuscript, St. George persistently encouraged Jenkins to seek publication. Jenkins contacted Vivian Stephens, the Black woman romance editor and RWA founder who transformed American publishing and was then working as a freelance agent (Moody-Freeman). While Stephens enthusiastically responded to Jenkins's work and agreed to represent her, the publishing landscape was less receptive:

I got enough rejection letters to paper [our houses]. . . . Publishers were saying, "It's a great story, but," and the *but* had to do with there was no box for it. . . . There was nothing, no box for a nineteenth-century African American-centered story that was not rooted in slavery. I have a story that is after the Civil War. A town on the plains of Kansas, founded by Black folks. New York and most publishing was like, "*What? What?*" (Easter and Rankin)

Finding a publisher for *Night Song* took years. Avon accepted the novel in 1993.

The contexts Jenkins faced when writing and publishing *Night Song* reflect an institutionalized racism that manifests simultaneously as a studied erasure of Black history and a concomitant commoditization which dictates the primary way Blackness enters the public sphere and becomes visible. Reportedly, *Night Song* was accepted after Avon learned that Kensington had plans to debut *Arabesque*, the first line dedicated to Black romance novels, which previously had been excluded, dubbed illegible and unsellable by white mainstream publishing (MacLean and Prokop, "Beverly Jenkins"). These dynamics of racial exclusion, erasure, commoditization, and control in romance stretch back centuries, as Margo Hendricks shows, shaping late twentieth-century American publishing. Here, I zero in on Jenkins's actions in this web, primarily as they confront and challenge Blackness's presumed historical absence, a smokescreen underwritten by its commoditization.

Jenkins's struggles to secure a publisher are not unrelated to the fact that she wrote her romance for herself—for a Black woman's gaze shaped by certain primary influences—rather than for white mass-market publishing. Of her formative experiences, Jenkins states, "[T]his whole career . . . is a byproduct of the way I was raised and from working in the library" (Moody-Freeman). Her mother was an early influence: "my mother was Black before it was fashionable. . . . I grew up with African American history in my home" (Easter and Rankin). Born in 1951 as the oldest of seven children, Jenkins explains that her mother read to her in the womb and had her children read Black classics by authors like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. Jenkins's description of her mother's Blackness apart from and predating faddishness (Black before Black obtained its "cool" factor in popular culture)

conveys a dimensional approach where Blackness is more than skin-deep; a certain interior cultivation was instilled in Jenkins.

A tutelage in Blackness, metabolized in the interior, permeates a second influence, giving further insight into Jenkins's gaze as one of self-regard. After attending Michigan State University but before she started writing *Night Song*, Jenkins worked as the head clerk at the MSU Graduate Library, which, she explains, had a full set of *The Journal of Negro History*: "I would take handfuls of those out on the Red Cedar River, which runs through campus, for my lunch hour, and just look through them because I was intrigued by the history. Little did I know that back then I was preparing for the life I have now" (Moody-Freeman). Jenkins's encounters with this groundbreaking publication, whose 1916 founding remains a countercultural touchstone asserting a Black historical self, primed her historiographic sensibilities. It prepared her for the types of histories she would recover, the stories she would tell, and sources she would embrace, like Quarles's *The Negro In* series and the documentary text she calls her "bible," *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Dorothy Sterling (Amos et al.).

These early influences reflect how Black interiority guides the historiographical frame that governs Jenkins's work. They throw into relief not only the content but also the manner in which she departed from the mainstream, in a mode akin to what Kevin Quashie calls "quiet." Examining a classic moment of Black protest—Tommie Smith and John Carlos's raised fists and bowed heads at the 1968 Olympics—Quashie reads the deep inward and prayerful nature of this gesture, theorizing it as quiet. Against superficial readings of Blackness as solely "expressive, dramatic, or loud" that "reflect the equivalence between resistance and blackness," quiet adds dimension by foregrounding the interior as "the inner reservoir of thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, ambitions that shape a human self" (3, 21). Quashie locates quiet with the "strong contemplative tradition in black culture" that is "inspired by the existential struggle of living with the confines of racial identity" and is not "reduc[ible] to . . . publicness" (24). Quashie's analysis of interiority and its oblique relation to protest is instructive, developing our view of the religiosity at stake in Black political activism, art, and culture by directing our attention to orientation.

While it may be tempting to read *Night Song* as a bold act of public defiance contesting an openly racist romance publishing world, it is vital to remember what Jenkins repeatedly emphasizes: that she was first writing for herself. Jenkins's early writing was not originally public but facing a different direction, not merely reactive but touching on something else. Quiet helps us see her act of drafting a romance as a contemplative endeavor with profound political impact. Through writing, Jenkins was departing from the quote in *Romantic Times* that erased the Black past, present, and future ("there *would be* no Black historicals"), but doing so through a turn in. She invokes this contemplative sense of the Black interior when she names the role of the Black gaze in her research and writing: "I wanted to get it right. I wanted to use historians who looked at American history through the Black gaze, the African American gaze, like Dr. Benjamin Quarles, and Dorothy Sterling . . . to get a different perspective" (Jenkins, "KDP"). The Black gaze is for Jenkins an epistemic, historical, and moral norm. Like earlier Black writers who wrote history as "an act of moral imagination," Jenkins began chronicling predicated on the internal connections affectively and critically made between historical understanding, collective identity, and freedom (Ernest 8).

In the ways that Jenkins centers interiority, affect, and desire in history, we discern a key part of her radical chronicling. About the early draft of *Night Song* that was submitted to

Avon, Jenkins chuckles and says, “I tell people I had several hundred pages of nothing but heat. Ellen Edwards . . . the editor . . . said, ‘Bev, the love scenes are great. We need a story.’ I was like, ‘I got to write a story? Okay, well . . .’” (Easter and Rankin). Jenkins’s romances are written in the vein of the epic historical romance that emerged in the late twentieth century, much of which was published by Avon and newly featured open-door, erotic sex scenes. *Eros* in the broad sense is, I argue, a core part of the historical task Jenkins undertook in writing *Night Song*, a Black historical romance initially written for herself amidst a public culture that said there could be no such thing.[11] Jenkins sold *Night Song* on the strength of those love scenes and built up the story around them. A central Black romance storyline led her to write a Black historical backdrop: “for me, it didn’t make much sense to have an African American hero and heroine and paint that story against a majority [white] background” (Easter and Rankin). Jenkins enlivened Cara and Chase’s story with a rich background modeled on Nicodemus, Kansas, a real Black town founded in the Great Solomon Valley in 1877. Jenkins named her fictional town Henry Adams after an actual historical figure involved in the Exodus. Henry Adams’s close-knit community, landscapes, and distinct historical experiences imaginatively bring to life the central romance and the real history of Black Midwestern towns founded by Black Southerners (“Exodusters”) who fled white supremacist terrorism after Reconstruction.[12] Consider this evening picnic scene between Chase and Cara:

“I couldn’t imagine living below ground,” Chase observed, running his gaze over the earthen walls and floor.

“You do what you have to sometimes. That first winter people didn’t have time to build homes or soddies, so they carved these places out of hillsides or dug them out of the earth. Some of the original ‘dusters will tell you they preferred living below ground in Kansas to living above ground with the Redemptionists.”

“You have a point there, schoolmarm.” . . .

She could tell by the blackness of the sky above their heads that the evening was coming to a close. “We should be getting back, I suppose . . .”

“Probably,” he replied, but made no move to stand. He seemed content to sit and watch her, making her desire heat up the longer his gaze caressed her. And when he did finally stand, it was not to lend her a hand in gathering up the tarp or basket contents. Rather, he slowly climbed the earthen stairs and pulled down the until now open dugout door. He made his descent and Cara could feel her clothing ignite from the blaze in his smoldering eyes. . . . For a moment he said nothing, touching her only with her gaze. She stood, locked by the passion he’d unleashed until he said softly, “Come here, schoolmarm.” (*Night Song* 147–48)

In this scene, an underground hiding space for Black Kansans surviving brutal winters and white supremacists now becomes a sanctuary for Chase and Cara’s blossoming romance. The

picnic ends with Cara's first encounter with oral sex, transforming a space of racial enclosure into an erotic space of sexual exploration, development, and pleasure, particularly for the heroine. This architectural inversion mimics the transformative work of the novel as a whole, in a dynamic that repeats across Jenkins's oeuvre.[13] Jenkins consistently narrates away from the enclosures of slavery and towards the expansive horizon of Black interiors, using those interiors to remake the world.

The way in which Jenkins weaves Black history and romance, using each to build the other, refracts her larger rehabilitative deployment of the erotic, a powerful religious resource according to Black women theologians, ethicists, and writers. Despite the flesh- and sex-phobia that characterizes modern Christianity and Black Christian culture, Black women have claimed the erotic as a salvific and sacred source. Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Alice Walker's definition of womanist, and Baby Suggs's liturgy of the flesh in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ("You got to love it, you!"; 104) are classic affirmations of *eros* and Black flesh against the devaluation of Black female embodiment. These affirmations mirror a Christian theological tradition dating back to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, which, reflected in later medieval commentaries on the Song of Solomon, celebrates desire—the ecstatic movement of erotic love—as originally divine (see Coakley). Black women scholars of religion draw on such resources. Womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher describes Black women's erotic fiction as "hush harbors," spaces of sanctuary, healing, and wholeness amidst a racist media culture saturated with dehumanizing stereotypes of Black female sexuality and a Black community and church culture repressed by respectability politics (Baker-Fletcher 205). Baker-Fletcher uplifts Black women's erotic literature as a corporeally and spiritually healing form that creates space for Black women to name and encounter truth, desire, and self in relation to God and to one another, healing self and community through what other Black feminists call "erotic autonomy" (Collins 218). Womanist ethicist Keri Day elucidates the religious import of the erotic for Black women's selves and the body politic in her writings on the Song of Solomon and on the theological interrelation of *eros* and *agape* as loves necessary for justice (see Day "I Am Dark and Lovely"; *Religious Resistance*).

Womanist ethicist Courtney Bryant's articulation of Black women's moral agency through her concept of erotic defiance offers a particularly comprehensive frame. Bryant defines the erotic as encompassing various forms of haptic (touch-based) communication of love and desire. Removing the shroud of shame that often surrounds Christian sexual ethics, Bryant locates Black women's sexuality and sexual pleasure among "a host of embodied practices" that "affirm the dignity and worth of Black and female corporeal being," like doing hair, providing food, and clothing and beautifying self and others (xvii). Through such expression of bodily care and affirmation, erotic defiance "asserts the notion of Blackness as desirable, . . . maintains a fierce love of and pleasure in Black flesh . . . and . . . enables Black women to assert possession of their own bodies and resist social regulation, commodification, and degradation" (xvii). Referencing Hortense Spillers, Bryant describes erotic defiance as an ethics of Black flesh, the *a priori* vitality of Black people's being that exists apart from racist white stereotypes of an imagined Black body.

Reading the erotic through these frameworks enables us to see eroticism as part of the radical ethics of Jenkins's Black gaze and her effort to "get it right." While eroticism and explicit sex scenes mark a significant departure from the Victorian mores of earlier chroniclers, Jenkins, by the same token, maintains their fidelity to seeking and depicting a deeper truth of Black being. Post-Reconstruction writers Harper, Hopkins, and others broke

ground with the first Black-authored sentimental novels. They used these forms to add dimension and dignity to Black subjects. Jenkins continues this work today. Writing over three decades after Jenkins began drafting *Night Song*, Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross implicitly affirm her groundbreaking work when they break continuing historiographic silences, declaring, “Black women’s sexual practices and erotic desires are fundamental to explorations of African American womanhood and history” (7). Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson likewise critique public discomfort with sexualizing Black historical female figures, showing how white supremacy haunts both racist stereotypes *and* countering Black racial efforts to canonize and sanitize Black sexual depiction. Jenkins’s erotic Black historical romance sidesteps this binary bind.

Centering desire within Black women’s moral agency, Jenkins transforms past, present, and future. *Night Song*’s reception among early Black women readers reflects these stakes:

When *Night Song* was first published, I ran into quite a few [Black] women who didn’t finish the book, because they thought that Chase or Cara Lee would die at the end of the book. And I’m like, nooo, that’s not what we do. We do the HEA, or the HFN [happily for now]. They’re not—no. . . . I may kill some people, but I’m not gonna kill my hero or heroine. . . . Had to explain that to more than one person (Amos et al.).

In noting her explanation to multiple readers, Jenkins intimates the pedagogical role she embraced as a published author. Though she construes this lesson as literary, I read something more. She is not just teaching genre expectations; she’s revising racial ones. Put differently, she is challenging race *as* genre.[14] Readers preemptively closing the book were anticipating preordained Black death, a racist trope.[15] Though protecting their imagination from presumed tragedy, in not reaching the HEA, these readers misbelieved a sad ending. But tragedy is not the transhistorical truth of Black life, Jenkins admonishes, and to believe that it is, she says, is “pain porn.” Jenkins’s charge indicts Black death as a pornotropic white mythos of the Black body and evokes Bryant, who ethically situates the erotic and pornographic as diametrical opposites and identifies the pornographic’s role in racism (Bryant 26–27). Bryant’s ethical framework structurally communicates the censure Jenkins voices, the moral difference she claims for her work, and the larger teaching in which she is engaged. Examining Jenkins as pedagogue provides a final angle on her work as contemporary chronicle.

Teaching through Chronicle: The Work of the “Kitchen Table Historian”

Jenkins regularly describes herself as a “kitchen table historian” who offers what she calls “edutainment” through her novels. Her language references her self-taught research method—“I put [the sources] out on my kitchen table and” do the research—and the teaching endeavor that is a part of her identity and aim (Amos et al.). It also, I find, refracts the primacy of Black interiority, desire, and ethics of erotic defiance. Analyzing Jenkins’s

pedagogy illumines these elements and connects her to a broader legacy of Black women's transformative cultural work.

Jenkins's pedagogical emphasis recalls the work of chroniclers past. Her historical commitment shines through the bibliographic Author's Notes she includes at the end of each novel. Her bibliographies serve to both educate readers and defend her work against those who "don't think Black folks have a history" and mistake the history in her books for fiction (Tucson Festival). Her paratextual content mirrors the truth claims earlier chroniclers positioned in their work. Priscilla Jane Thompson prefaced her 1897 poetry volume *Ethiophe Lays* with these words: "I have endeavored, as nearly as possible to picture the real side of my race bringing in the foreground, their patience, fortitude and forbearance, devoid of that undertone of sarcasm, generally courted" (Maffly-Kipp 253). Hopkins similarly introduced her romance *Contending Forces* (1900): "The incidents portrayed in the early chapters of the book actually occurred," noting archival evidence (14; Dagbovie 99).

The distinctively Black nature of this meta-historical labor was highlighted during a recent historical romance panel when Jenkins assiduously maintained her fidelity to historical accuracy, whereas fellow panelist Julia Quinn, author of the white historical romance *Bridgerton* series, did not (Tucson Festival). The ensuing conversation highlighted how where history ends and fantasy begins is a racially weighted and morally freighted issue, as white fantasy often warps, erases, and masquerades as history. Though both romance writers, Jenkins and Quinn as *historians* are involved in two distinct endeavors. Jenkins continues the work of Black chroniclers to redress history and restore truth.

Jenkins also uses her homespun moniker to downplay her credentials and differentiate her work from formal scholarship, claiming culpability for possible mistakes: "And me being a kitchen table historian, and, you know, not a degreed historian, anything that's wrong, it's my fault, not my sources" (Amos et al.). Yet even this marginalizing self-effacement echoes earlier chroniclers. Aware of the ways that Black historical speech was becoming gendered male through the venues of the pulpit and professional press, nineteenth-century Black women "found ways of writing history without announcing it as such" (Maffly-Kipp 247). A distinct "reticence" and "frequent hesitan[cy] to make substantial claims for the importance of their own work" mark their texts and manifest through their choice of genres alternative to the traditionally male grand narrative historical format (247). Yet, scholars show, Black women's "stories, plays, and tales of the race containing suggestive or qualified assertions of their own significance" bely the critical capacities of their work, which "fundamentally challenged the category of 'history writing' as a discrete narrative form" (Maffly-Kipp 247; see also Dagbovie 99-102). Jenkins's domestic "kitchen table historian" participates in a long line of Black women's subversively gendered, categorically expansive historical work.

Jenkins's particular subversion surfaces in an unintended, apropos connotation. Readers of Jenkins know that kitchen tables are frequent sites for steamy interludes in her novels, such as in her 1997 western *Topaz*: "There, on the tabletop, in the Frederick Douglass suite, Katherine Wildhorse, her brown body ripening in the bright morning sunshine, moaned as her husband's hands once again raised her heat" (196). Similar scenes recur with such frequency that Jenkins's aunt, after reading her books, once declared, "[O]kay, I'm never eating on your kitchen table again!" (Shani and Bridget).[16] While Jenkins shares her aunt's exclamation as a humorous aside, it holds consequence, I contend. The resituating of the domestic as an erotic site functions in her rehabilitation of Black historical consciousness

and links her to currents in Black women's transformative cultural work. Her nomenclature evokes the language, sensibilities, and choices of Black women contemporaries, like Alice Walker, who writes of the pleasures and power of telling history through the domestic (Walker 355–56); Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, who in 1980 founded the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press; and Carrie Mae Weems, whose 1990 *Kitchen Table Series* is a renowned work in Black women's modern art. Tina Campt identifies the kitchen as a signal site of African American geographies and a space of Black feminist agency and reclamation. Campt writes that the kitchen table in Weems's work is a site for a Black woman's constitutive relationships with friends, lovers, kin, and herself, and thus "signifies not as a space of domestication, but one of self-making, becoming, and empowerment," individual and communal (17). In representing "women's ability to refuse domestic enclosure and refashion it into a space of pleasure, desire, and intention," the kitchen table is a primary example of African American space as "more than the built environment," and, instead, a social praxis that "refuses the precarity of Black life by reclaiming quotidian spaces as generative sites of creativity and possibility" (Campt 16, 17).[17] In Jenkins's novels, the kitchen table is a medium that ushers readers into the larger work of chronicle. It reflects the erotic ethics ordering her work.

The pedagogical yield of this erotic ethics is captured in Jenkins's term "edutainment," which she uses to describe the blend of education and entertainment that is the experience and end result of reading a Jenkins novel. She states, "It's a way to teach American history with all its warts and with all its bitterness . . . you learn as you read"—and with "no test on Friday," "you can enjoy it" (Moody-Freeman; Amos et al.). While one might posit romance as the entertaining vehicle for the educational content of history, I resist this separation. Maintaining the blend can help us think more expansively about education and entertainment, romance and history, and Jenkins's impact, as reflected in her readers' responses:

The reaction has just been amazing from the beginning. Especially with my third book, *Indigo*, which highlights a very, very dark-skinned woman. Women were weeping at the signings because they had never been centered in a story like that before. Booksellers were crying. Everybody's crying. *I'm crying!*

To see themselves on the page when they'd never seen themselves on the page before—it[s] life-affirming, life-changing. And the thing they're most proud of? It's the history. To be able to say we were more than slaves and sharing that history with their grandkids. I'm on my fourth generation of readers now, and it's been an amazing ride. (Bates)

Jenkins cites two reader responses illustrating edutainment, in my read—the romance elements of her work cannot be excluded from the education, and the historical is likewise part of the pleasure. Jenkins first describes the unexpected response to *Indigo* (1996), which met with a particularly moving reception among dark-skinned Black women who, through the heroine Hester, newly saw themselves portrayed as beautiful and desirable in literature. This reception communicates with pathos about how the romance teaches as much as the history, in ways intended and unintended.[18] The learning here addressed colorism, an intimate, painful societal issue that affects Black women's self-image and

relationships (see Stewart). Even if these readers already knew themselves to be beautiful, seeing it portrayed was a powerful teaching moment affirming Black beauty. Education is not solely new knowledge, but can also be confirmation of those truths we deeply know and feel. Jenkins's "edutainment" engages head and heart, teaching both.

This integrity permeates the second reader response, which Jenkins details elsewhere:

I think one of the joys of the history is that when you educate a woman, you educate a race. . . . I'm on grandchildren right now. The women who started with me and their daughters, and the daughters of their daughters . . . all learning that history. One of the ladies said her grandson did a Black history paper. I don't know what it was . . . the Black and Brown outlaws of the Indian territory, something like that. And the teacher wanted to know, "Where did you get this information?" He said, "Out of my grandmamma Ms. Bev's books." [Jenkins chuckles] (Easter and Rankin)

Jenkins's "joys of history" names the affective weight at stake in history. When it comes to Jenkins's Black historical romance, the fact that it is true *is* part of the pleasure, particularly for Black readers whose history has been misrepresented, erased, and denied. This pleasure and its affordances show up in things like a grandmother passing the history in a Jenkins romance on to her grandson for a school project. Above, Jenkins names pride as an operative affect—pride in history, specifically a history beyond slavery. I read this pride not as a simple effort to distance oneself from slavery, but as a more complex comment on how a commitment to Black historical accuracy opens up truths foreclosed by slavery and obscured by its falsehoods and mythologies. As John Ernest writes, referencing Black philosopher Charles Mills, "African American historical representation is both a reading and an unreading," and a Jenkins romance accomplishes both of these epistemic moves (8).

In addition to and within pride, I also read desire. Jenkins's quip, "when you educate a woman, you educate a race," names the tutelage underway: the cultivation of desire for Black history. The pupil of his grandmother, the grandson becomes the educator in his classroom where the teacher is now the student—and, crucially, the teacher is not just learning facts, but being schooled in a different way of knowing. The teacher's ignorance reflects not just a lack of knowledge about Black history but also the racist resistance to reading Blackness *as historical*. Noah Webster voiced this racist worldview in 1843: "I would remark that of the woolly haired Africans, who constitute the principal part of the inhabitants of Africa, there is no history and there can be none. That race has remained in barbarism from the first ages of the world" (Hall 49). Anti-Black racist historiography literally shapes the grammar of life in the modern West. Down to the syntax, Webster's totalizing, ontological reach ("there *is* no history and there *can be* none") echoes centuries later in the racist quote in *Romantic Times* asserting "there *would be* no" Black historical romance. The grandson's report refutes this thinking and demands a different way of knowing. The way of knowing he passes on to his class from his grandmother, who is passing it on from Jenkins, orbits the *a priori* reality of Black flesh, rather than relentless racist construal of an ahistorical Black body. It is Black desire as a pedagogical strategy, an historiographic aim, an epistemological tact, an ontological orientation. It is *eros* as the

epistemic way into Black history, which forms and shapes Black history as a love for Black selves.

Conclusion

As others have noted, Beverly Jenkins is an Episcopal lay minister who deftly deploys biblical allusions in her work (see Dandridge, “Love Prevailed”; MacLean and Prokop, “Indigo”). However, as I have argued, her use of Black history is also *itself* a religious mode. Jenkins innovates in the Black chronicling tradition and writes communal histories harnessing Black desire as a pedagogical and political tool that is, ultimately, religious. As seen through her romances, readers, and her own experiences, desire is a critical element that is both vital to narrative and active beyond it, transforming not just readers but their community as a whole.

Edutainment is, I suggest, the pedagogy of Black desire. Understanding it as such offers us a way to read the *eros* at work in Jenkins’s historical romance and see its expanse. As theologians affirm, the erotic is of personal and communal value, empowerment, knowledge, and nourishment. Edutainment—ultimately, a love for Black selves—is what brings about Black women’s deeply felt reactions to *Indigo* that read it as communicating something far beyond a love story. It is what’s at work in a grandmother passing on the history fueling a Jenkins romance to her grandson, who in turn passes on that history to his class. And it’s what prompted Jenkins to draft *Night Song* in the first place.

We might place Jenkins writing *Night Song* alongside the classic photo of Olympians Smith and Carlos, not as direct parallels but as instances that speak to one another. Put together, these moments image how the quietude of Black historical romance—its affective inner movements of desire and feeling—is not solely a genealogical inheritance of romance, but also of Black radical traditions, specifically Black women’s literary activism. This inheritance enables us to hear the religious as more than just metaphor when Jenkins describes her writing as “a gift from God” (Shani and Bridget), describes herself “preaching the gospel of African American *American* history” (Campbell et al.), and says of her vocation, “It seems like it has been my ministry, *tap, tap, tap on the shoulder . . .* to bring that nineteenth century to life, in a way that people can access it, . . . can be proud of who they were, and still see the struggle in a real light, so that it’s not glossed over” (Kahn). Connecting Jenkins’s words with an ethics affirming Black women’s “erotic power as a resource for moral good,” we comprehend the multifaceted religiosity of her work (Bryant xvii). We perceive her radical innovation within an ongoing Black communal effort that uses history to rehabilitate the past, reframe the present, and rewrite the future. This effort finds fruition in the transformation of readers’ own desires, understandings, and actions recuperating Black historical selves for the present and future of the race. As these very desires have often become the starting point inspiring new Jenkins romances through avid fan mail requests and encounters,[19] we see that Jenkins’s novels are themselves a kitchen table—a meeting space and social praxis, a place of quiet and erotic defiance, a hush harbor. A sacred space.[20]

[1] LGBTQIA+ characters appear in *Winds of the Storm*, *Captured*, and *Rebel*.

[2] See also Stewart, as well as Nicole Jackson's comments on the problematic slippage between "Black" and "interracial" in romance publishing and on Jenkins's singularity (Ammidown and Jackson).

[3] See Jenkins's comment that we were "more than slaves" (Bates), discussed later in this article.

[4] Black religious institutions do not play a role beyond landscape, Jenkins says (see "The African American Historical Romance").

[5] See Selinger and Vivanco.

[6] Morrison writes, "[F]acts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" ("The Site of Memory," 239).

[7] Consider Bea Meldrum in *Indigo*.

[8] Harry S. Stout writes of Fort Pillow, "Claims of black soldiers buried alive may have been inflated, but it is clear that scores of black soldiers and some white compatriots were 'massacred' after their surrender—an act of cold-blooded murder" (319).

[9] I implicitly reference Matthew 24:6 KJV, which reads "And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet." It is instructive to read Jenkins with this verse in mind, which theologically deepens our understanding of the work she is doing in centering Black historical memory. Jenkins similarly offers eschatological comfort and hope in the face of apocalyptic terror and distress in Black experience.

[10] Cf. Jackson.

[11] I am not arguing that Jenkins's work is erotica or erotic romance, which are other specific subgenres. Instead, I am identifying that the erotic treatment and depiction of Black love—as an embodied, felt form on the page—is central to the work Jenkins's Black romance enacts. See Karen Baker-Fletcher's "The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women's Writings" for a use of the term as I mean it here.

[12] Community is central in Jenkins's books. Henry Adams has become a character in its own right across her oeuvre, linking her historicals with her contemporary women's fiction series *Blessings*. (See Jenkins's comments in "Author Insights," *Bring on the Blessings*; Moody-Freeman; Amos et al.).

[13] For example, *Indigo's* Underground Railroad safe house's secret passageways ferry Galen's nightly visits to Hester. I thank Lisa Beyeler-Yvarra for helping me articulate "architectural inversion."

[14] Hendricks describes race and romance as "two genres" (xii).

[15] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas observes, "[T]he Dark Other is subject to textual violence, which often results in character death" (27).

[16] Novels featuring steamy kitchen table scenes include *Night Song* (1994), *Indigo* (1996), *Topaz* (1997), *Jewel* (2008), and *Forbidden* (2016).

[17] With similar insight, Baker-Fletcher describes kitchen tables as hush harbors (205).

[18] Jenkins did not seek to elicit that reaction but was simply representing an Afro-centric spectrum of beauty (Moody-Freeman).

[19] See fan dedications and Author's Notes in *Captured*, *Forbidden*, and *Night Hawk*.

[20] I am grateful to the peer reviewers for their suggestions.

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