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Jayashree Kamble

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ROMANCING THE UNIVERSITY:
BIPOC SCHOLARS IN ROMANCE NOVELS IN THE 1980s AND NOW¹

Jayashree Kamblé

LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York

jkamble@lagcc.cuny.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4466-4434>

SUMMARY: English-language mass-market romance novels written by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) writers and starring BIPOC protagonists are a small but important group. This article is a comparative analysis of how recent representations of diversity in this sub-set of the genre, specifically the character of the Black academic and the language of racial justice, compare with the first group of BIPOC novels that were published in 1984 (Sandra Kitt's *Adam and Eva* and *All Good Things* as well as Barbara Stephens's *A Toast to Love*). In Adrianna Herrera's *American Love Story* (2019), Katrina Jackson's *Office Hours* (2020), and Talia Hibbert's *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* (2020), the authors deploy the academic protagonists and setting to stage the intersections of gender, queerness, race, class, and immigrant histories, particularly as they manifest in academia, the supposed haven of free thought. In contrast to the 1984 BIPOC academic romantic protagonist, the more recent incarnation voices the cost that racism and sexism imposes even on seemingly successful people of color and articulates the structural changes and reparative policies that must be adopted for true equity.

KEYWORDS: popular romance, academia, BIPOC, gender, racism, social justice

ACADEMIA Y ROMANCE: LA FIGURA DE LA ACADÉMICA NEGRA Y DE
COLOR EN LAS NOVELAS ROMÁNTICAS DE 1980 A LA ACTUALIDAD

RESUMEN: Las novelas románticas en inglés escritas y protagonizadas por mujeres negras, indígenas o de color conforman aún un grupo reducido, pero importante en el mercado. Este artículo propone un análisis de la diversidad racial, y más concretamente del personaje de la académica negra y el lenguaje de la justicia racial, en novelas recientes de este subgénero romántico, que se comparan con una serie de novelas publicadas en 1984 (*Adam and Eva* y *All Good Things* de Sandra Kitts, y *A Toast to Love* de Barbara Stephens). En *American Love Story* (2019) de Adrianna Herrera, *Office Hours* (2020) de Katrina Jackson y *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* (2020) de Talia Hibbert, las autoras recurren a personajes y escenarios académicos para visibilizar cómo las intersecciones de género, sexualidad, raza, clase, o las historias de inmigración se manifiestan en un entorno universitario, supuestamente el bastión del pensamiento libre. A diferencia del personaje de las novelas publicadas en 1984, la manifestación más reciente de esta figura verbaliza el coste que el racismo y el sexismo imponen a personas de color aparentemente exitosas y articula los cambios estructurales y las políticas reparadoras que deben adoptarse para lograr una equidad real.

PALABRAS CLAVE: novela romántica, academia, personas negras, indígenas o de color, género, racismo, justicia social

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INTRODUCTION

The last forty years have seen the publication of English-language mass-market romance novels written by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) writers and starring BIPOC protagonists, an important but small sub-set of the genre. Indeed, despite the fact that the genre is over a century old (if we count its origins from the British firm Mills & Boon's establishment in 1908), BIPOC characters have largely been absent or marginal. Authorship was decidedly white as well till the start of the 1980s, when the first wave of BIPOC romance novels appeared in the U.S.² Starting with that moment of change, my aim is to explore the representation of Black life in academia across two groups of romances separated by four decades; specifically, this article is a comparative analysis of the character of the Black academic—a graduate degree holder or doctoral student who is a teacher or expert practitioner in a scholarly discipline—in the first group of BIPOC novels published in the early 1980s and of more recent representations of the same in the genre. The comparison shows how the figure of the Black academic has served different functions in the past versus the present moment and highlights a dramatic shift in the way BIPOC romance authors address race and racism through the infusion of racial justice discourse in the recent works.

Adam and Eva (1984) in the early corpus is set in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where the male protagonist is a scientist researching local flora and fauna for the National Oceanographic office. The novel's author, Sandra Kitt, also published *All Good Things* (1984), casting hero Eric Davidson as a practicing artist as well as the doctorate-holding chair of a college art department in the American South. The third novel in this cohort is *A Toast to Love* (1984) by Barbara Stephens; this one has a female academic: young Columbia-educated historian Dr. Paige Avalon, who is assisting a research project in Texas. The three recent novels are Adrianna Herrera's *American Love Story* (2019), which shows Haitian American Patrice Denis, an economics professor at Cornell University, struggling to reconcile his anti-racist social justice activism with his attraction to a white male prosecutor, and also highlights the pressures of earning tenure that he experiences as a Black junior faculty member; *Office Hours* (2020) by Katrina Jackson, which shows us the demands of the tenure-track as well but on Black female sociologist Dr. Deja Evans, who is at a Midwestern American university and is starting a romantic relationship with a Latinx colleague; and finally, Talia Hibbert's *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* (2020), which takes us to a British university where Black Briton and Ph.D. student Danika "Dani" Brown wants a sexual unromantic relationship while she builds an academic career, but "catches feelings" for a romance-reading, Muslim, South Asian-British campus security guard.

Though all the novels immerse us in a multicultural world that is frequently sidelined in the genre, the 1984 ones focus on the love plot and show us the professional successes and competence of the academic character without referencing any racial barriers or biases that they or other marginalized groups face.³ In contrast, the recent works address discrimination by utilizing the academic character in a pedagogical capacity. In other words, the authors deploy the academic protagonists in the university setting to school the reader on the intersecting oppressions of gender, queerness, race, class, and immigrant histories, particularly as they manifest in academia, the supposed haven of free thought. The juxtaposition of the first generation of academics alongside

² For more on this history, see Grady (2020), Jenkins (2022), and Kamblé (2023).

³ For further discussion on this issue of the sidelining of BIPOC, see Jenkins (2022), Hendricks (2022), Kamblé (2023) and Ripped Bodice (2022).

the current ones lets us see how the latter voice a direct critique of structural inequality. The shift in the recent works toward incorporating overtly political statements calling out racism and other discriminations situates them in the post-Black Lives Matter era, which has a global resonance, as well as in queer challenges to homophobia and support for immigrants and refugees voiced by a new generation of activists (some of whom are descendants of these groups in the U.S. and the U.K.). The prior works can then be seen as emerging out of a phase of reformist Black politics in the U.S. in the 1970s, which placed emphasis on positive self-representation by African Americans rather than the confrontational strategy of the 1960s (or the activist moment we are seeing now) (Kamblé, 2023: 256).

A few definitions and parameters before we look more closely at the comparison between these works might be helpful. The study covers both Black romance novels, which is to say, ones written by Black authors and in which the romance plot revolves around Black protagonists, as well as BIPOC romances, written by BIPOC, with at least one Black or multi-racial protagonist who identifies with one or more ethnicities alongside being Black. It also focuses on contemporary romance, which are stories set in the author's own time, and «category» romances, which are identified with a publisher's guidelines for an author, including word count.

THE BIPOC ROMANCE NOVEL'S STORY AND THE APPEARANCE OF BIPOC ACADEMIC ROMANCE

For most of the genre's history—much of which is coterminous with the history of Mills & Boon and the consolidated Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB) company—the editorial practice was to feature a white-dominant world created by white authors. (The firm would not diverge from its policy of only publishing novels with white protagonists till 1981 and Kitt's *Adam and Eva* in 1984 was its first Black romance, as defined above.) Meanwhile, in the growing American romance publishing industry, white authors had free rein to write about other ethnicities, including Native, Black, Asian, and Latinx American characters, especially in the historical romance sub-genre. At the same time, publishers often asked BIPOC authors to change the ethnicity of their protagonists to white and also obfuscated the authors' own identities in the novels' paratexts (Moody-Freeman, 2021b).

It is *Entwined Destinies* that gets the credit for being the first mass-market contemporary «category» romance novel that had Black protagonists and was written by a Black author. A contemporary «category» romance is a love story that is usually under 300 pages (often 190), sticks to a publisher's prescribed plot structure, and is set in the writer's contemporary moment. *Entwined Destinies'* author, Rosalind Welles, a.k.a. Elsie B. Washington, set her novel in 1970s London, and it was ushered into print by a Black editor, Vivian Stephens, in 1980. Stephens took charge of the Candlelight romance line at Dell in 1978 New York and transformed the genre in many ways, including in its inclusion of BIPOC romance protagonists and authors (Moody-Freeman, 2022).

In the years immediately following this momentous event, there was a small burst of Black and BIPOC romance novels in the U.S. But the tenure of the two editors who contributed to this rise did not last long; Stephens was hired at Harlequin to launch their Harlequin American line in 1981 but let go in 1983, while Veronica Mixon's editorial position at Doubleday was terminated in 1988 following a take-over by Bertelsmann (Moody-Freeman, 2021c). While in those editorial positions, their combined output of BIPOC romances was fourteen, while two appeared from publisher Silhouette in the 1980s. The early 1990s saw a small group of BIPOC, especially Black, romance, at both

small and large American publishing houses, and Kensington launched a bigger slate under its Arabesque line between 1994-1998 (Moody-Freeman, 2021a: 238-39; Kamblé, 2023: 263)

While that 1990s wave of BIPOC and Black romance might be more familiar to both readers and scholars due to its relatively recent appearance, this essay looks back at the Black romances starring academic characters from the 1980s wave in order to trace a longer arc of the change in how Black romance now addresses issues of social justice. These novels are written by Black authors who are identified or alluded to as such in the paratext of the books and/or other publicity/marketing materials. The paratextual declaration of Black identity (for both the author and the protagonists) is presented in a range of elements: author photos on the jacket, cover art that accurately reflects the main characters' ethnicity, epigraphs and dedications that explicitly locate the author within a Black family and community, etc.

This public acknowledgment of BIPOC authorship was first put into practice by Vivian Stephens at Dell Candlelight, but was also replicated at Doubleday by Mixon. Mixon published *A Toast To Love* in 1984, a novel by Vivian Stephens's sister Barbara; as noted above, its heroine, Paige, is a Black historian, and the novel's dedication as well as Stephens's bio on the back flap establishes her similarity to the character as well. The cover itself shows a Black couple against the backdrop of a large house. Mixon also brought out *All Good Things* by Black author Sandra Kitt that same year, and Kitt's author photo and bio appears on the inside back-flap while the dedication to her grandmother notes her Gullah heritage. The cover of this novel features a Black couple against the outline of a camera. Kitt also published two paperback contemporary category romances in 1984 for Harlequin American Romance—one with white characters and one with Black characters, again thanks to Vivian Stephens's brief career there. The latter, *Adam and Eva*, thus has the distinction of being Harlequin's first Black-authored Black romance as noted above, and represented both protagonists as Black on the cover. While Kitt's ethnicity was not mentioned on these Harlequin covers, her bio provided personal and professional details similar to those in the paratext of *All Good Things*. Readers picked up on it. Publishing historian Paul Grescoe notes that some complained that a story about "[t]hose people" was published in the imprint, making it evident that the protagonists' and author's racial identity caused a ripple (1997: 279).

Adam and Eva is set in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where the novel's male protagonist, Adam, does research on marine flora and fauna. The backstory Kitt offers us recounts his commitment to the less prestigious fieldwork arena rather than the more lucrative arm of applied sciences/industry. He also recounts his youthful dream of forming a professional couple with his biologist college girlfriend and his later disillusionment with her pursuit of upward mobility. Through the gaze of Eva, the female protagonist vacationing there, we learn that he is skilled at his work and a good teacher to his daughter. Moreover, in a conversation where Adam and Eva are reconciling after a disagreement, his offer to relocate to wherever she chooses to attend law school also shows that his cv provides him with professional options, including re-joining the military as a civilian researcher. These bits of information establish Adam's academic credentials and class status, but there are no references to the difficulties a Black man might have encountered in a racist educational and professional STEM structure in the U.S. in the late 1970s/early 1980s. This portrayal is in contrast to the data that Evans (2007), among others, have documented about the challenges Black students faced and continue to face.

In *All Good Things*, Kitt adopts an interesting strategy where she withholds information on the academic life of the hero, Eric, from the reader and the heroine, Jackie. Instead, she mentions an off-stage character named Spence, a professor who is part of the

community that Jackie is visiting on Johns Island near Charleston. Her friend Gwen wants her to meet Spence, because he's «smart, caring, knows what he's doing» and is slow-paced but Jackie jokes that instead of being a «paragon of manhood», he sounds «dull...and orthopedic!» (19). The man she spends most of the novel with, Eric Davidson, appears to be a laid-back house painter who lives in a somewhat ramshackle home and has a working class self-presentation. We encounter his academic credentials via his artwork first and only learn later that Eric is the head of a college art department when Jackie is included in a gallery show of local artists alongside him. A doctoral degree-holder in Education, his full name and title is Dr. Eric Spencer Davidson. It is at this point that we retroactively put together what we know of Spence through Gwen and fuse it with the man who we have already met on page in another guise. Jackie admits that she made assumptions about him based on his appearance and lifestyle and her friend suggests that he did not correct her so she could get to know him without his credentials and overcome her own prejudices (178). In the process, Kitt presents us with a highly educated Black man with academic standing and gives no hint of him having encountered any racial obstacles, just like with Adam in *Adam and Eva*. She hints at and then foregrounds his achievements and undermines white supremacy by erasing its presence in the narrative.

Finally, Paige Avalon, the Black historian heroine of *A Toast to Love* appears from the get-go as an ambitious academic, with a clearly formulated goal to use her doctorate to become a professor and pursue research in the field of African American history. Author Stephens tells us of her doctoral training at an Ivy League university, made possible by a family that has both educational and financial resources. The sub-plot of the novel is built on Paige's academic credentials, since she enters the hero's orbit because of her new teaching position and a summer research project being undertaken by his uncle, a famed African American academic. The latter, too, comes from a wealthy family and is described similarly to any other white professor who is a successful writer and public intellectual. While the research project Paige undertakes with him foregrounds Black history, Stephens does not mention any past or present resistance to either their research or their very identities in higher education.

In their portrayals of Black academics, these 1980s Black romance novels have a distinctive approach to representing Black life: countering racist stereotypes without naming racism. As such, they show their roots in an era that followed the waning of 1960s Black cultural nationalism and a rise in the attitude that Black people should put their best foot forward (rather than agitate) as a strategy for racial progress and harmony while building coalitions with other groups in electoral politics (Kamblé, 2023: 256). As mentioned, Adam and Eva have white-collar interests/occupations that attest to their intellectual and middle-class status. In a media landscape that had no representations of Black women professionals and very little of Black male professionals, these are remarkable portraits.⁴ At the same time, while the novel shows Black and multi-racial communities (in the U.S. Virgin Islands), there are no references to racialization or hints of radical racial politics. Instead, any friction in the plot is about gender politics. The scientist hero's character arc is to stop blaming his ex-wife, and by extension, other women, for their ambitions, while hers is to stick to her goal of going to law school while overcoming old losses and trusting her love for Adam.

The couple's antagonistic relationship is in keeping with the gender conflict highlighted by Second Wave feminism and is a common plot device in many romances of the time, and one that BIPOC novels also employed, leaving out tensions related to

⁴ For more on the images of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) and the Black Lady, see Kamblé (2023:258-60).

American racial structures. The choice could have been a pragmatic one on the author and editor's part: a largely female (and white) readership who might be familiar with feminist demands would understand this gender friction and accept it more easily than a plot in which racial discrimination was a theme (Kamblé, 2023: 259). Similarly, naming the protagonists after humanity's Biblical parents and setting the story on an Edenic island away from mainland U.S. race politics and divisions would have been in line with this de-racing of their identities, serving to forestall potential reader resistance to issues of racism that Black characters might evoke. Vivian Stephens has also said that she was aiming for multi-racial representation that would reflect the fabric of American society rather than any activist principle of establishing racial equity:

I didn't really have in mind, like, I'm going to do Black books. My thing was to really represent the whole culture. [...] So since romance is romance, I didn't particularly care what color they were, but I wanted each group because in America, and as I did in my tip sheet for African American writers, I said everybody, every group, because America is made up of all groups from some other place except the Native Americans. (Moody-Freeman, 2022)

Meanwhile, Mixon also seemed to have had her authors downplay race and foreground a seemingly traditional conflict between a man and a woman, possibly because she needed to reassure her editorial board that Black life and desires were no different from those of other groups and the Black romances she published would not have anything "controversial" (Moody-Freeman, 2021c; Kamblé, 2023: 256). Likely in keeping with that, Barbara Stephens structured her novel's central conflict around her protagonists' differing views on women's roles. *A Toast to Love*'s plot is hindered by the hero's sexist skepticism of the ambitious academic heroine's interest in being a romantic partner, a common theme in the genre at that time, while there is no indication that American racism affects either of their lives. Yet there are numerous studies that document that even after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case made racial segregation in education illegal in the U.S., Black students, especially women, found college and university life in Predominantly White Institutions to be very challenging (even fatal) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities were also often put at a disadvantage through deliberate obstacles in accreditation processes (Evans, 2007: 170-74). Since Stephens was a college professor herself (as her bio noted), she would have been aware of these problems in higher education.

But instead, Stephens writes both protagonists as possessing class privilege, which one might infer as insulating them from racism's stings. They belong to well-to-do families that appear to have provided them the means to pursue their current professions (politics and academia) and their future goals. She does use the historian heroine's occupation and a sub-plot about her collaborative research project on a Black town with the senior Black scholar to include informative passages on nineteenth-century African-American history during the Reconstruction period. In these sections, Stephens mentions the past enslavement of the town's founders, but focuses on their achievements and success, just as she describes the hero's political career as a Texas legislator without any references to Black political disenfranchisement, the Jim Crow era, or the Civil Rights movement. As a result, her description of a self-made and assertive Black community provides a unique representation of Black life devoid of racial anguish or racist ambush.

Similarly, though the paratext of *All Good Things*, as noted above, includes cover art and author photo as well as a dedication—"To Nana, a Gullah..."—that reinforces its identity as a Black romance, the plot summary and the content revolves around the protagonists' art rather than on racial marginalization or conflict. Kitt sets the novel in

the Gullah community, a unique Black sub-culture in the Sea Islands off the coast of the Carolinas, near Charleston. Starting a project on Gullah life and traditions is an attempt by Kitt's heroine, former model Jackie Taylor, to become a photographer. She's in Charleston in pursuit of this goal and her introduction to the Gullah community on Johns Island (mediated by the hero at his own insistence) becomes a portal to a slice of American history and of contemporary life deeply influenced by West African culture. Kitt has Eric, a Sea Islander himself, lead Jackie and the reader into a deeper understanding of Black history that escapes the clichés associated with African Americans and toward a portrait of an organic community with its own linguistic and culinary traditions. It is only later that we realize that in addition to having insider knowledge, his determination to show her the culture's facets stems from his training as a college educator. As with the other two novels, the structure locates them in a post-Black Panther atmosphere of creating a positive impression of Black Americans and their strengths without criticizing racist policy or practices; in other words, instead of the cultural nationalism of the 1960s, it reflects the influence of the politics advocated by leaders like Jesse Jackson (Kamblé, 2023: 256). It also makes sense in the context of the genre's commitment to the happy-ever-after (HEA) rule; dismantling its «white characters only» tradition was possibly already a Herculean task for editors and authors without having the plot grapple with the painful reality of racism. As Stephens told a journalist, she turned down a lot of manuscripts that didn't fit the genre (Bray 72). Resultantly, these published novels show exemplary Black professionals, whose HEAs were possibly easier to shape and market.

BIPOC ACADEMIC ROMANCES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Unlike these Black romance novels published in the 1980s, which bypass calling out racism and partly adhere to respectability politics by foregrounding erudite and sophisticated protagonists whose chief conflicts are inter-personal disagreements about gender roles, sexual behaviors, and career aspirations, the novels I turn to now confront racism and misogynoir head on. Their BIPOC academic romance protagonist functions to voice the cost that racism, sexism, and heteronormativity as well as outsider status imposes even on seemingly successful people of color and to articulate the structural changes and reparative policies that institutions must adopt for true equity. This perspective has been long overdue in the genre.

To wit, *American Love Story* (2019), *Office Hours* (2020), and *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* (2020) depart from the 1980s novels' tendency to avoid a direct discussion of racism. The first two novels in this trio are by Black American authors and critique the burdens and internalized racism of respectability politics, as well as the overt harm of systemic racism. Meanwhile, Black British author Hibbert's *Take a Hint*, a BIPOC British romance, sidesteps American romance fiction's traditional race and respectability discourse, but resembles *Office Hours* and *American Love Story* in that it shows the pressures in academia for a Black woman (in Britain), and also counters limited or bigoted representations of the Black and South Asian Muslim British community.

The register of all three novels, written by young Black/Afro-Latinx authors, shows contemporary rhetoric on combating anti-Black racism. This political perspective has emerged in the wake of Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 essay on intersectionality, which has become a key idea in mainstream discourse on all forms of discrimination. Additionally, a decarceration politics emerging around the turn of the millennium from the writings of public intellectuals and activists like Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore has become widely known. Other anti-racist interventions that have filtered into mainstream media include Michelle Alexander's analysis of the carceral American state

apparatus in *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and movies on structural racism, like *13th* (2016) by Ava DuVernay. Most recently, the Movement for Black Lives, which coalesced between 2014 and 2016, and the Black Lives Matter network, with the hashtag BlackLivesMatter, has challenged police brutality, through both street activism and online forums (Bell 2022, M4BL).⁵ Around the same time, the hashtag SayHerName was created by the African American Policy Forum to call attention to the police violence leveled against Black women. Not only did this online activism draw in a wider swath of people, its coverage by popular publications (like *Teen Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily*) meant that activist talking points about everyday racism, demands for defunding police, and strategies for combating routinized racial profiling that had gone unchecked became widely known (Feitelberg, 2020; Fondren, 2020).

These developments are visible in the plots and rhetoric of Herrera, Jackson, and Hibbert's novels, even though all of them are based on middle-class values, including success in traditional professions and monogamous relationships, which are still key features of mainstream romance publishing. (Even if Jackson published *Office Hours* independently, it meets the industry's commonplaces in this respect.) In other words, they are unlike the 1980s «Buppy» (Black Urban Professional) romance novels in that they are going beyond individual success stories to discuss structural discrimination; simultaneously, they differ from the novels that were marketed as «urban fiction» or erotica in the 2000s (which had BIPOC protagonists with working-class or illegal occupations and who engaged in sexual encounters that did not conform to romantic monogamy or demisexuality) (Kamblé 2023: 255, 262).

Notwithstanding this investment in some seemingly traditional values, all three use the academic protagonist (plus their partners and acquaintances) to highlight the tension between white racial hegemony and Black and BIPOC life. Specifically, the figure of the academic articulates that tension and its harms through interior monologues as well as dialogs and interactions, the latter peopled by both sympathetic listeners/allies and overt and covert antagonists. Through these episodes, the novels bring in ideas from social justice activism, including the kind of allyship that is needed from members who do not belong to the minoritized group.

Afro-Latinx Dominican-American author Adriana Herrera's *American Love Story* is a contemporary m/m (with two male protagonists) romance that was first published in mass-market format by Harlequin's Carina imprint in 2019 and then reprinted as a trade paperback in 2021 (suggesting the writer's popularity, among other market trends). The third in her «Dreamers» series, the novel revolves around a Black economics and public policy professor who has just been hired for a tenure-track position at Cornell University and a white interim District Attorney for the city of Ithaca in the state of New York. The covers of both editions of the novel feature a young Black man who has long dreadlocks, while Herrera's author's note mentions the «challenges that many young black and brown men in America face» and voices the hope that people will work together to make all communities safe.

Dr. Patrice Denis is a Haitian-American immigrant who studies racism and its policy corollaries and is vocal in calling out abuse of power on social media, including the racial profiling of young Black men by cops. His past fling with Easton Archer and the persistent attraction between them pits their HEA directly against American structural

⁵ While there is a tragically long list of people from Black and other minority groups in the U.S. who have been impacted by police brutality, including the use of tactics that caused death, this specific moment might be associated with the killings of Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. The activism around these incidents received wide coverage and entered public conversation (Adams, 2020).

racism. Easton not only works for a system designed to perpetuate harm to BIPOC, he comes from a wealthy white family, some of whose members relish their privilege. As is also the case in Jackson's *Office Hours*, Herrera provides a glimpse into the challenges of being Black in American academia, with back-biting colleagues pretending to be political allies and the pressures of tenure-requirements and racist respectability standards; these issues are exacerbated by the specific politics of an Ivy League university environment, where being denied a permanent position is almost certain, especially for BIPOC (Fogg, 2004; Pierce, 2005).

American Love Story is written from Patrice and Easton's first-person point of view in alternating sections. Patrice's interior perspective gives us access to the experiences of a Black professor and immigrant. The novel reminds us of the struggles of immigrants and asylum seekers, of the constant threat from police experienced by Black men when they drive or simply exist in the U.S., the careful mask of inscrutability or politeness Black people (including professionals) have to don in order to be seen as non-threatening, and the special stings they are subject to in academic spaces in blatant and subtle digs about their intellectual worth. For instance, at a fundraiser where he meets Easton's parents, Easton's mother implies that a Black man like Patrice must feel out of place in an Ivy League environment because it's not the «urban» (i.e., Black, poor, inner city) life he's used to and he senses her belief that he hasn't earned his position on intellectual merit (ch. 17). He resents the judgment but keeps his response polite since his mother has trained him to never show negative affect around prejudiced white women. Similarly, he stays impassive when his white colleague Brad suggests his research on race is a «little controversial» (ch. 2) and his social media activism on «hot-button» issues like racial profiling is looked at unfavorably for its «heated» affect by senior colleagues (who vote on a junior faculty's promotion and tenure application (ch. 2)).

Simultaneously, passages from Easton's point of view show us how the judicial system poses a danger to the Black community, even when staffed by people who think of themselves as liberals. Easton's female boss and the male sheriff they interact with are white queer characters who are vulnerable to homophobia but are reluctant to treat racial profiling as a problem. Herrera uses Easton's conversations with them about aggressive traffic stops and police harassment of young Black men to explain concepts like implicit racial bias and micro-aggressions, and the necessity of reforming institutions that pretend that racism is not pervasive.

Herrera also introduces readers to Patrice's family's struggle to build a life in the U.S. after fleeing Haiti. Moreover, we see his rejection of racist aesthetics that are coded as moral behaviors in his adoption of dreadlock hair, piercings and tattoos, and t-shirts, sneakers, and athleisure wear, all of which is associated with low status communities. It is a choice that his mother disapproves of (as a first-generation Black immigrant who values assimilation and respectability politics); the judgment hurts him partly because he knows that appeasing white supremacy is a pointless strategy. As he tells Easton, «she gets militant about my locs or tattoos, going to church, my nose ring, wearing sweats» because «she thinks they give people the wrong idea of the kind of person I am» (ch. 7). He adds that even though he knows people do misjudge him, he won't change anything because «no matter how my hair is or what I'm wearing, people will always make assumptions» (ch. 7), assumptions that are anti-Black stereotypes. Herrera thus describes the broader similarities of his experiences to that of Black male peers who are from African-American or African-descent families while also distinguishing his specific experiences and immigrant history from that of Afro-Latinx men whose heritage is Dominican or Puerto Rican. Even Easton's attraction and desire for Patrice is narrated

through his growing understanding of Patrice's Haitian-American heritage, including dialect, food, and family history.

Herrera studs the novel with the theme of institutional racism within academia as well. While Patrice is a confident scholar and social media user, Herrera shows us how some of his new colleagues want to undermine him and sow doubt about his right to be at an Ivy League university. For instance, as noted above, he has a white male colleague who makes digs about his research area not being rigorous and slyly suggests that his appointment happened for reasons other than academic achievements. Despite the man claiming solidarity with Patrice on the grounds of being gay (and therefore an oppressed minority), Herrera thus demonstrates how anti-Black racism continues when people do not practice intersectional politics. Brad's comments also show how academics can be particularly guilty of spouting a rhetoric of solidarity without true allyship.

Katrina Jackson dramatizes a variation on this problem in *Office Hours* as well, but with the focus on a Black woman's experiences. The female protagonist, Dr. Deja Evans, is a Black sociologist on the tenure track at a university in the American Midwest. Jackson is a Black historian at such an institution herself and paints a picture of the life of someone who inhabits that subject position. Through sections narrated from Deja's own perspective as well as through scenes that show us the point of view of her male love interest, including his interactions with another woman of color professor, Jackson gives us a tripartite perspective on the challenges of being a young Black woman in U.S. academia.

The central plot of *Office Hours* involves Deja's struggle to maintain a work-life balance and a semblance of mental and physical well-being in a space that is indifferent to her needs at best, and even actively hostile by design. Meeting and starting a romantic relationship with Alejandro, a tenured Latinx colleague in another department, introduces a complex combination of his support and well-meaning but ignorant suggestions into that situation. Based on the cover of the two editions Jackson released and other references in the novel, Alejandro is white-presenting, and Jackson uses the set-up to enlighten him (and by extension, readers) to the tight-rope that a Black woman academic frequently walks in a world that covers the gamut from implicit bias to outright bigotry. She unpacks structural sexism, classism, anti-Black racism, and how even allies can overlook the intersecting oppressions of those structures.

In Deja's sections, like Patrice's in *American Love Story*, we see her coping with the demands of being a professor during her third year, a crucial milestone for a tenure-track junior faculty hoping to earn tenure. For one, she is tasked with teaching massive introductory level classes alongside graduate seminars, all requiring labor-intensive grading of quizzes and extensive written feedback on essays of various lengths. The requirements of the probationary period also mean she has to serve on multiple college committees, leaving her little energy or time to meet another crucial requirement for tenure: research and publication. She also struggles to set boundaries with student mentoring, trying to balance helping them without exhausting herself by mothering them, especially the Black students who are the first generation in their families to enter higher education. The overall effect is burn-out and loneliness, exacerbated by the sense that she cannot reveal that she feels «overworked and unproductive» to Alejandro (ch. 10).

While outlining these issues, which could be true for a Black woman in any high-pressure job, Jackson also targets structural racism as it operates within the American academic world. Unlike the 1980s novels, *Office Hours* openly addresses how Deja is negatively affected by racial insensitivity in her environment: as she once despairs, while «[s]he was [the Sociology department's] first tenure-track hire in nearly a decade, part of a campus-wide diversity initiative meant to bring in marginalized faculty», the

department provides no mentoring or recognition of what being the only faculty of color there might be like for her (ch. 6). Such passages make it clear that the department and university is not supportive of Deja's growth and happiness. Not only is there an overall culture of overwork, there is zero recognition of the needs of BIPOC women, often first-generation college graduates, even as they are hired to boast about the institution's commitment to diversity.

Jackson also uses her insider perspective to highlight the fact that as taxing as tenure-track positions like Deja's are, the situation is even worse for contingent women faculty. Passages on her friend Marie Lau, an adjunct in the Ethnic Studies program, show us that academic structures treat these instructors even more callously, especially women of color faculty, while extracting labor from them. The problem Jackson highlights has been observed in many academic studies and news articles covering gendered racism in academia in multiple countries.⁶ Marie's predicament of teaching a huge number of courses while being denied a professor position, with its attendant job security and benefits, represents this reality.

Additionally, Jackson intersperses these sections with the point of view of Alejandro, who is a proxy for well-meaning allies who miss the point—that race and gender bias often function together to make life worse for Black women in any sphere. His musings over Deja's behavior show us that he initially sees her intensive labor as a personal flaw of workaholicism—an inability to prioritize tasks, or set boundaries. In other words, despite his affection for her and his understanding of racial bias because of his Latinx identity, he fails to recognize an issue that Black feminist scholars emphasize—that racist and sexist structures operate simultaneously on Black women, and to make matters worse, society at large also puts the onus on them to be perfect without betraying any signs of stress or negative affect.

Jackson then gives us a conversation between Alejandro and Deja's unofficial mentor, a tenured woman of color, to school him (and us) about his shortcomings. In great detail, Dr. Toni Ward points out how little support the institution offers junior BIPOC women on the tenure-track, leaving it to women like her to try and mentor all of them. As she lists the effects of this culture, including burdening women of color with service assignments (some related to diversity initiatives) till they burn out, and his complicity in it, we see his dawning realization that he needs to be more aware of how discrimination affects women of color faculty. This conversation facilitates the romance's HEA but also does anti-racist work overall, serving to enlighten the reader about these systemic problems.

Similarly, in Talia Hibbert's *Take a Hint, Dani Brown*, a Black British doctoral researcher is trying to balance teaching and her thesis project alongside managing her single state after a recent break-up with the woman she had been dating. The one bright spot in Dani's life is Zafir «Zaf» Ansari, the security guard at the entrance to her campus building who is a Punjabi British ex-rugby player. A man who likes reading romance novels, Zaf is seemingly the counter to the academic-theorist Dani, who only wants a friends-with-benefits «situationship». This preference stems from her recent conviction that she is incapable of providing romantic companionship since the attendant emotion work detracts from academic tasks.

Yet when a campus fire-drill traps her in a lift and Zaf is recorded carrying her out of the building, the video goes viral on social media, with people «shipping» them—imagining a romantic relationship—as #DrRugbae. Zaf subsequently asks if they can

⁶ For further discussion of this issue, see Bourabain (2021), Evans (2007), Mirza (2006), and Morris (2016).

temporarily pretend to be a couple so that the publicity raises the profile of Tackle It, the non-profit he runs to promote mental health strategies among teen boys. Dani believes that the incident is how the goddess Oshun has answered her prayer for a fuck-buddy. She thinks that faking a romance will throw them together and help her proposition him into a non-romantic sex partnership while she continues her single-minded focus on her research on misogynoir and an upcoming talk at an academic symposium.

Alongside this premise, Hibbert makes race and gender central to the intellectual inquiry undertaken by the protagonist (as does Herrera) and also centers the cost that academic culture extracts from the Black female academic (as does Jackson), in this case a Black British bisexual female Ph.D candidate. The arc of Dani's character is tripartite: developing confidence in her scholarly chops without burning out, learning to trust Zaf's acceptance of all her traits (including her tendency to deprioritize performing romance in traditional ways), and making time to fulfill her own potential for long-term romantic intimacy.

The first is visible in a major plot thread about Dani preparing for weeks to speak on a panel alongside her professional idol, a pioneering Black professor named Inez Holly. Hibbert uses the character of Holly both to highlight the contributions of Black women scholars to feminism—the memorable line is that Holly had «made feminist literary theory her bitch»—and to note the continuing dearth of Black women academics in the U.K. (27). The latter has been observed in studies like “Transcendence over Diversity: Black Women in the Academy” in which Mirza points out the paradox of an extremely small number of Black women professors and staff in higher education in the U.K. even as the numbers of Black female students increase (2006, 102-03).

These themes are a commentary on Dani's own life, since she has devoted herself to her career not just because of her genuine interest in her research topic but also a lack of Black female mentors who would also model how to have a balanced life while pursuing an academic career. She is newly single after being dumped by a woman who wanted more intimacy, she works obsessively to the exclusion of most social relationships, and often neglects food and sleep in order to continue reading and writing. She has also started to tell herself that her personality does not lend itself to a companionate pair bond and that her plan to achieve certain professional goals within a specific timeline are incompatible with a commitment to another person who will expect her participation in social rituals.

Like Jackson, Hibbert thus shows us the particular demands that a Black woman internalizes – suppressing some aspects of herself in favor of working long hours in order to accomplish professional goals – at the cost of her emotional and physical well-being. Dani's star-struck encounter with Holly provides an opening to confront this tension and also throws into relief the fact that British academia has failed to create and nurture Black women cohorts. Hibbert thus takes an intersectional angle on the lack of Black professors in the U.K., which made the news in 2014 when University College London hosted the panel «Why Isn't My Professor Black?», a question that continues to be asked by students and explored by researchers. Dani represents both the Black British woman student and professor who inhabits this white-centering environment. As Mirza noted in 2015, data had shown that less than 1% of U.K. professors were Black and a fraction of that group were women (6). Even as agitations about the whiteness of the university have led to significant policy changes in the U.K., such as the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, which emphasized evaluating institutions' practices when it comes to racial equity, researchers have pointed out that such policy changes haven't resulted in major

improvements.⁷ That the Black women professors who do get hired in academia experience significant racism is also documented (Gabriel and Tate, 2017). Hibbert makes this public conversation a dominant thread in her Black woman doctoral researcher's life.

The novel is also a workplace romance that models how workplaces could be better for BIPOC. Dani's long acquaintance with Zaf and their mutual secret crush have begun on campus where he monitors the entrance to the building that houses one of her classrooms. Though he is business-like about checking student IDs, he and Dani have a different, nurturing, rapport. Not only does she bring him coffee every day while he gives her a protein bar because he knows she neglects to eat, it is clear that he cares about her when he gets worried about her safety during the fire drill. While evoking numerous romances that have a «grand gesture» episode, his search and rescue of her shows they are not casual work acquaintances, or worse, people racially divided (and conquered) by white supremacy. The episode could bring to mind its real-life opposite: in 2018, Professor Priyamvada Gopal, an Asian lecturer at Cambridge, protested the racist treatment she consistently received from the porters at King's College, provoking a conversation about literal racist gate-keeping in British higher education (Ferguson, 2018).

As Dani and Zaf's relationship progresses from fake to real, Hibbert makes Zaf's interest and approval of her (and his respect for the time her work demands) explicit and thus facilitates Dani's realization that being immersed in her research does not make her a weirdo (though she needs to take breaks for her well-being). We also see his irritation with the fact that not everyone seems to grasp how smart she is and Hibbert has him catalog the reasons why Dani is obviously a genius (such as having multiple degrees). In normalizing the Black female academic's nerdiness in this way, Hibbert structures Zaf's desire for Dani as being inseparable from his admiration for her mind, and while letting us glimpse that mind, Hibbert brings in keywords from Black feminist, queer, post-colonial, and critical race studies. For instance, Dani is writing a thesis on the «evolution of misogynoir post-chattel slavery» (193), but instead of long passages on the research topic, Hibbert gives us quick references to it during Dani's interactions with Zaf as well as in glimpses of how she does her research. Through this, without the overt statements against racism or misogyny that we see in *American Love Story* and *Office Hours*, Hibbert's Black woman academic heroine provides an intersectional representation of Black female life in modern Britain.

Not only does Zaf grasp Dani's ideas on intersectional feminism, scenes from his point of view show us that he sees her intellect as core to who she is and finds it actively attractive. He is charmed by her fangirling over Inez Holly's essay on the politics of desire and he reads her everyday habits as expressions of her lightning intellect. When visiting her at her apartment once, he scans the walls and notices the one plastered with post-it notes (a mind map that we know is filled with Dani's research on intersectionality and feminist literature, authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Zadie Smith, thoughts about concepts like misogyny/misogynoir, and academic provocations like «*a room of whose own?*» (151). After taking it in, he thinks, «This wall of sticky notes is Danika's brain; well, part of it. Probably a tiny part, considering how smart she was» (160). It reminds him of a time she was using terminology like «cissexist understandings of gender and family» and «creolization» and while he had not grasped the details, what he had found appealing and impressive was how rapidly her mind worked to connect ideas, «[h]ow many logical steps she didn't even need to say out loud because apparently, they were

⁷ For further discussion on this issue, see Ali (2022), Fakile (2021), and Rollock (2021).

obvious to her [...] Danika Brown was faster and sharper than a whole lot of people» (161). Hibbert underlines his desire for her mind and body in that precise moment by having him turn around and see her all dressed up and being «aggressively sexy and mildly terrifying»; when they then look at her «wall of doom» together, he takes pleasure in her appearance as well as in her «chaotic, almost impossible to read hand-writing and her brilliant, almost impossible to follow thought processes» (162)

He later asks to attend the symposium at which she is a presenter and terms it the same as «cheering someone on at a match» when Dani is surprised at his interest, convinced as she is that he would be bored (165). When he does attend her panel, a rugby fan recognizes him and tries to make conversation, but he shuts him up with a firm statement that he's there to support Dani and won't stand for someone talking over her or preventing him from hearing her. It's also during the talk that he realizes he's in love with her, a moment adumbrated by an earlier episode: a radio talk show to which they are invited includes a dating-game that reveals to the reader that he knows Dani well and values her intellectual life rather than seeing it as something impractical or irritating or disqualifying her as a romantic partner. The portrayal is Hibbert's vision of how it is not necessary for a Black woman to change herself to become desirable to a man, and that Dani's academic rigor adds to her worth as a romantic companion.

What is also interesting is that it is Zaf's love for romance novels, which Dani does not read (and initially miscategorizes or misidentifies as porn) that clinches the day. As they draw closer, he explains that romance novels contain stories of hope and happiness based on supportive romantic bonds. This understanding helps her resolve her own ambivalence about romance's effect on her career goals. At the end, not only does Dani woo Zaf with a «let's see where this can go» proposal in a flower-strewn rugby field, she builds on this in the novel's epilogue. Set one year later, it shows her cementing her commitment to their HEA through a gesture that is both a testament to her researcher skills and is meta-fictional—presenting him with autographed editions of his cherished romance novels; we are told that she studied them as she does academic sources and then tracked down the authors for signatures, an act that testifies to her love.

One must also keep in mind, however, that this end is partly facilitated by Dani's spiritual tradition involving the Caribbean deity Oshun, who is manifested, in a sense, by three older Black women: Dani's dead grandmother, Nana Rose, who was an «obeah woman» (200) practicing African traditions handed down across generations of Caribbean descendants (starting with enslavement), her other grandmother, Gigi, a famous singer and sex symbol, who directs her granddaughters to follow their bliss, and Inez Holly, the Black scholar who tells her to find joy and practice self-care alongside doing intellectual work.

In effect, the career of Hibbert's Black academic protagonist, with its intellectual understanding of misogynoir and intersectional feminism, functions to clue readers in to the working of racism and sexism; but the academic character herself has to understand—take the eponymous «hint»—her own needs through non-academic sources, including African female-centric spiritual traditions, previous trailblazing Black women academics' hard-earned experiences about prioritizing non-work aspects of the self, and a novel genre deeply connected to women's romantic desires. The last is also linked by Hibbert to a brown man's recognition of how romantic love can be a healthy counter to toxic masculinity.

CONCLUSION

The arc of Black and BIPOC romance novels toward stronger representation of social justice and inclusion is in the rising phase. Thanks to pioneering editors like Veronica Mixon and Vivian Stephens, and authors like Welles, Kitt, and Barbara Stephens, Black and BIPOC creators began challenging the «cut direct» that the industry gave them. In their novels, the very presence of educated, professional Black protagonists who find love and sexual fulfillment with a partner was a revolutionary intervention in the media landscape. Moreover, these positive representations of single Black women professionals filled a lacuna in American media at the time. In effect, though these novels did not voice the language of anti-racism, their existence and the happy end in their love stories were themselves the rebuttal to white supremacy.

Though Mixon and Stephens's careers at publishing houses ended in the 1980s, their work forced open the gate to romance publishing for BIPOC. One of Mixon's last novels was *Careless Whispers* (1988) by Rochelle Alers, who has since had a long writing career, as has Sandra Kitt. Stephens also mentored many BIPOC writers and acted as a literary agent, and Beverly Jenkins, who went on to find fame for her Black historical romances, was one of her early clients (Stephens, 2022; Jenkins, 2022). Silhouette published a couple of Black romances by Tracy West in their First Love (Young Adult) romance series in the 1980s as well, though they and most major publishers had started to shrink from the endeavor, claiming poor sales for Black romance. Odyssey Press, a short-lived endeavor by Leticia Peoples, published a few Black romance novels in the early 1990s, starting with Donna Hill's *Rooms of the Heart* (Moody-Freeman, 2021a: 238). Starting in 1993, Genesis Press focused its Indigo imprint (whose first novels were released in 1995) on African American romance and, as Ann Yvonne White notes, on «professional women» (in Moody-Freeman, 2021a: 235), and Arabesque, the romance imprint launched by Kensington in 1994, went on to publish a significant number of Black romances in the mid-1990s; the latter is often attributed to the efforts of the late editor Monica Harris, and Black romance has since had a presence in the genre, though it has been a long and often difficult march (Moody-Freeman, 2021a: 234-35; Jenkins, 2022: 12-15, Kamblé, 2023: 262-64).

Many BIPOC authors have toiled in the genre in the last twenty years, with writers like Brenda Jackson, Shirley Hailstock, Margo Hendricks, Courtney Milan, Rebekah Weatherspoon, Piper Huguley, Kennedy Ryan, Sherry Thomas, Nalini Singh, Alexis Daria, Jeannie Lin, Alisha Rai, and Alyssa Cole, among many others, writing a range of romance, both historical and contemporary, and sub-genres like fantasy, sports, sci-fi, and mysteries. Some discuss racism directly or indirectly, others do not. Cole's *A Princess in Theory*, the first of her Reluctant Royals series, is another great example of a scientist protagonist whose interior life employs the language of anti-racist critique, especially when it comes to gendered racism in STEM (Kamblé, 2023).

The principles of anti-racist and abolition movements, mobilized by young activists (who have learned from their predecessors) in both the streets and online, are now a distinctive feature in many media texts, including BIPOC and Black romance. «Defund the police» is a cry that activists deploy within and outside the U.S., calls for the humane and inclusive treatment of asylum seekers and refugees resound in both climate marches and election rallies, college syllabi and popular magazines include the work of abolitionist, queer, and environmental feminists, and chants and social media outcries of «Black Lives Matter», «Protect Black Women», «Say Her Name», and «Hands off My Body», challenge violence against women and minorities in domestic, public, and policy spheres (where it is legally sanctioned/shielded by the state). It is in this intersectional

vein that contemporary writers like Adriana Herrera, Katrina Jackson, and Talia Hibbert have taken up the banner for assertive and unapologetic Black feminist—and critical race theory—infused love stories. Romance is, after all, the promise and practice of freedom; there is a new vanguard in the field fighting to achieve this goal today.

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