CHAPTER EIGHT

HOW DARE A BLACK WOMAN MAKE LOVE TO A WHITE MAN! BLACK WOMEN ROMANCE NOVELISTS AND THE TABOO OF INTERRACIAL DESIRE

GUY MARK FOSTER

> He cupped my face and his eyes seemed to plead with mine. "Are you willing to give us a try, then?"
>
> I thought for only a second, then said, "Yes."
>
> He breathed a sigh of relief. "I didn't know if you were going to say yes or no."
>
> "Actually, I think I knew the answer to that question a long time ago."
>
> His expression was tender, as he said, "I love you so much."
>
> "I love you, too. I really do," I returned as he bent his head and kissed me again and I wrapped my arms around his neck without a second thought.
>
> I was deeply happy and deeply in love and despite all of my reservations before, I no longer felt as if a line had been crossed. The difference in our color was not an issue to me and at that moment I didn't think or care about the consequences that might come our way. I just wanted to be with him.
>
> And that's all that mattered. (Carter 340)

The above passage serves as the closing lines to Lizzette Carter's recently published interracial romance, *The Color Line* (2005), in which the novel's black female protagonist is depicted in the final stages of an emotionally draining journey. After surviving a series of stiff oppositions to her effort to admit to family, friends, and co-workers alike, but also to herself, that the man she has fallen in love with is white instead of African American, this woman is finally able to be at peace with her decision. But such peace is not easy to come by. For many contemporary heterosexual black women, white men continue to be, in terms of the psyche, virtually indistinguishable from white males in the

historical past. The latter were men who imposed themselves on black women's bodies with impunity, and who made every attempt to strip these women of their dignity and self-worth through rape and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. For some scholars, contemporary black women's psychological anxieties about the role this horrific past continues to play in the present is the real reason why couple relationships and marriages between black women and white men remain outnumbered two to one by those between black men and white women, and not because white men are failing to choose black women as lovers and wives (see hooks 69; Dalmage 62). This anxiety is captured vividly by one contemporary black woman who, faced with the prospect of dating just such a man, wonders aloud: "Am I the strong, comely wench with the good teeth that the slave master looked for in a black woman back then? Am I the hot Sally that turns him on?" (Romano 237). Because Americans as a group have never properly confronted this history, nor adequately resolved the devastating political and economic disparities that history left in its wake—i.e., chronic structural inequality between blacks and whites, disproportionate life expectancy rates for the two groups, the cultural devaluation of blackness in general, and black womanhood in particular, racially gendered stereotypes, and the list goes on—white men continue to present specific challenges for heterosexual black women to overcome if they are ever to view these men as potential object-choices rather than oppressors.

Although we can discern traces of a similar psychological struggle having been waged in the mind of the narrator in the above passage, the fact that the novel ends with this woman and her lover finally reunited after being estranged for much of the book suggests that she has somehow resolved many of these challenges—at least for the time being. What the narrator's concluding affirmation suggests (an affirmation that was a long time in coming in the narrative) is that she did not always feel as she now does, neither about this relationship, nor about this man in particular. Quite the opposite, in fact. The narrator's resistance to taking a white man as her lover and confidant—to transgressing the imaginary "line," as she puts it, between the socially constructed racial categories of "black" and "white"—was evident from the first pages of the novel, a plot feature that is endlessly repeated in numerous contemporary interracial romances. Conceptually, this recurring feature, or trope, of these texts recalls a similar "line" of sexual transgression, one which, in Western societies, separates such culturally normative desires like heterosexuality from its stigmatized counterpart, homosexuality; curiously, most theorists have tended only to identify and map the latter imaginary "line" *as* sexuality per se, but not the former—a point to which I will return later. This essay suggests that such narrative emplotments, symbolized by transgressions of the color line, as well as their enormously satisfying endings, are emblematic of

such texts, which have become a growing sub-genre within the romance market. A brief sampling of these texts, in addition to Carter's *The Color Line,* includes: Dyanne Davis's *The Color of Trouble* (2003), Margaret Johnson-Hodge's *The Real Deal* (1998), two by Sandra Kitt: *The Color of Love* (1995) and *Close Encounters* (2000), and Monica White's *Shades of Desire* (1996). In most of these novels, just as in the above excerpt, the emotional and psychic release the protagonists enjoy by the narrative's final page leaves readers with the distinct impression that something dramatic has changed in our society to bring about such a complete reversal of affect for such women. But what exactly?

If we take what Peter Brooks has said about plot to be true, namely, that "[p]lots are not simply organizing structures [but] also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving" (12), we might say then that the plot of the interracial romance novel *purposely* reproduces and repeats within its narrative structure some of the same anxieties and fears that are often associated with black-white intimacy among contemporary blacks and whites who exist in the world *outside* the text. This is an anxiety that these men and women have inherited as a result of the horrors of the past, and which some believe continue to hinder any productive resolution of those past events in the present. What is useful to note, however, is that interracial romances reproduce this anxiety and fear only to short-circuit it by the novel's final page, so that ultimately the black female protagonist and her white male companion get to enjoy having their formerly tabooed union embraced by some of the very same individuals who would have been happy to see that relationship aborted. In the end, the types of "narrational strategies" to which I am alluding, "serve to cast doubt upon the presumed 'naturalness' of a conceptual model" of heterosexual desire that would insist on viewing race and sexuality through rigidly segregated frameworks—one made legible to us by the centrality of the color line (qtd in Abelove 604). These narrational strategies therefore call into question common-sense assumptions about the strict oppositions that "race" and "sexuality" are supposed to encompass: in this case, I suggest, such segregation results in black same-race heterosexuality and homosexuality, on one side of the color line, and white same-race heterosexuality and homosexuality, on the other. This *analytical* color line, one which separates race, gender, and sexuality into what is putatively regarded as "equal" halves, remains a central problem of much of contemporary theoretical discourse. It is one that often renders illegible the complex sexualities of people of color in general and those of black women in particular. In many of these analytical accounts, the three categories are understood as separate rather than categories that are themselves mediated by all the others to produce the conditions of legibility. For example, little of this work thus far has managed to tell us, in any consistent way, just how, to use Allan Bérubé's formulation, gender is "lived through" race and sexuality, or

how sexuality is itself "lived through" race and gender, and therefore experienced differently for different subjects at different times and places (243). This takes us to black women writers, their readers, and the romance genre.

Black Women Readers and the Romance Genre

According to industry analysis, the romance fiction market enjoyed annual sales of $1.41 billion worldwide at the end of the last millennium. Of this total, approximately 10 to 30 percent of these sales were attributed to African American consumers, many of whom, but not all, appeared to buy primarily from the growing niche market of romance imprints that specialize in black-on-black heterosexual coupling (see Dyer C1; Osborne 61). These figures suggest that black women have been readers of popular romances since the genre first emerged with the appearance of Harlequin in the late 1940s. Unfortunately, the storylines that Harlequin generated at the time did not include African Americans or any other people of color as protagonists, only whites. It would not be until a black female journalist published the first ever black-themed romance novel, *Entwined Destinies,* under the pseudonym of Rosalind Welles in 1980, that heterosexual black women would be able, to invoke the specialized language of Freud's developmental theory of human sexuality, to bring their identificatory and desiring identities into the type of "same-race, different gender" alignment that was culturally sanctioned as normative at that time by both blacks and whites (see Collins 247-278).

Because of this dearth of published romantic fiction with black heroines prior to the 1980s, black women who chose to read romances often had to engage in Herculean feats of imagination just to find pleasure in them. For a politically engaged black reader (that is, someone who came of age imbibing the nationalist rhetoric that proclaimed "black is beautiful" along with her mother's breast milk), this meant having to find white men sexually desirable by one of several means: either by (1) transforming themselves, at the level of fantasy, into white women, in which case they could pine over and lust after white men safely within the confines of a "proper" same-race, different-gender identification; (2) transforming both the novel's hero and heroine into blacks, and therefore maintaining the integrity of their own raced identification; or (3) such readers could bracket out race altogether and consume the narratives as if racial identification, whether black, white, or other, and the myriad cultural issues that routinely circulate around those identifications, were not a factor in the lovers', or in the reader's, subjective experience of the text. Whichever strategy these readers decided upon, they could not desire white men *as* black women, since doing so was socially proscribed both in the white community and, increasingly through the 1950s and 60s, in the black community as well.

Engaging in such covert pleasure was not always without a corresponding price, however. Some women who eagerly consumed these works during an era when it was not taboo to identify and desire cross-racially would experience a jarring reality when, virtually overnight it seemed, all such practices were deemed a form of betrayal of other blacks, if not self-hatred against oneself for being black. Whether these reading habits became a matter of public knowledge or not, I suggest in this essay that the black female reader of these romances would often police her own desires if no one else did. However, one thing this individual would *not* do apparently is to stop reading these narratives altogether.

The contemporary black romance author Evelyn Palfrey confirms my analysis on this point. In her revealing article, "The Writing Life," Palfrey explains what it was like to read these early romances in which none of the main characters were African American:

> There was a time when I had to *pretend* that the heroine had short, nappy hair like mine, instead of long, flowing and blond tresses. A time when I had to *pretend* that the tall, dark and handsome hero really was dark. I guess I was too young and hungry for romantic images to realize how ridiculous it would be for this heroine to be chased across a Scottish moor, or through the streets of London. (Palfrey 16; emphasis mine)

On the one hand, the author's reliance on the distancing language of "pretense" reveals the extent to which she found her consumption of these novels psychologically troubling, so troubling that today she feels the need to qualify her past identification with the novels' characters as a willful, even youthful, act of imagination. Indeed, Palfrey's need to read these narratives was so insistent, she tells us, that she was willing to suppress her own corporeal identity as a black racial subject in order to satisfy that need. However, on the other hand, she does this by disavowing knowledge of the fact that not all heroines of romance novels have, as she puts it, "long, flowing and blond tresses," or the fact that black women actually *do* live in places like Scotland and London today. Moreover, the author chalks up these disavowals to the fact that she was too immature to know any better. But was she?

For what Palfrey does *not* say in her article is that those early romance novels she read so feverishly were actually "historical" and not contemporary romances—the dead giveaway being her sly reference to "Scottish moors." Therefore, these narratives were already removed from herself, both in terms of temporal distance and geography. I want to suggest that these misleading statements function to convey the author's profound discomfort, even shame, with reading white-themed romances at all. In other words, Palfrey is trying to convince her readers as much as she is trying to convince herself, retroactively, of the historical integrity of her "politically" correct, same-race heterosexual

desires: that is, as a black woman she has *always* desired black men and never desired white men, even if the white men she desired had to be transformed first into black men before she would desire them. Indeed, as Palfry puts it, she must have only *pretended* to identify with the heroine and to desire the hero; she couldn't have really had those feelings. After all, to have really had those feelings would have meant that at some level Palfrey hated herself for being black. She must have also hated all black people because they too were black, especially, as a self-avowed heterosexual woman, black men. And for a black woman like Palfrey, living in the U.S. in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, such a self-image was particularly difficult to reconcile.

Amazingly, this double bind of sorts would persist for most black female readers of mainstream romance narratives until 1994 when a major publishing house established an entire line devoted exclusively to African American romances. Kensington Publishing became the first major publisher to back an African American romance under its imprint, Arabesque. Palfrey remembers the first time she came across one of these titles:

> I will never forget the day another mother at my daughter's school gave me an Arabesque paperback. I could see the cover from across the room. So being the shy person I am, I walked right up to her and said, "Where'd you get that?" She had just finished the book and gave it to me. Well, I took it home and read it that night. The very next day, I was at the black bookstore when it opened. Talk about a kid in a candy store! Rochelle Alers, Maggie Ferguson, Gwynne Forster, Donna Hill, Beverly Jenkins, Francis Ray. I bought one of each. And I was just as happy as a pig in slop. Those writers brought me so much joy. *I no longer had to pretend.* The heroine not only looked like me, but she acted like me. And thought like me. And the heroes—they were like the men I knew. (Palfrey 16-17; emphasis mine)

While Palfrey's exuberant language shows that she clearly over-identifies racially with some of the characters and scenarios in the romance fiction she reads, I would say that her over-identification speaks more to her eagerness, as a politically-engaged, heterosexual black woman, in wanting to consume *psychically* satisfying images of black-on-black heterosexual intimacy, than it does to the fact that the black male and female characters in African American-themed romances all look, act, and think like herself. More important to the author, it seems, is that these are images of heterosexual intimacy that do not require her, as a condition of her readerly pleasure, to consider the psychologically displeasing notion that she may be self-hating because she is black and the characters in the narratives are not. The feminist critic Tania Modelski rejects the easy slippage some people believe readers of romances make between themselves and the characters in these novels. Writes Modelski:

> Since the reader knows the formula, she is superior in wisdom to the heroine and thus detached from her. The reader, then, achieves a very close emotional identification with the heroine partly because she is intellectually *distanced* from her and does not have to suffer the heroine's confusion. (41)

Modelski's insight about readerly identification and distancing is useful not only for understanding how contemporary white female consumers of romantic fiction engage with these texts, but it is just as useful, I think, for coming to some understanding of how contemporary black female consumers engage these works as well. After all, black female readers of black-themed romance novels live in a society they recognize daily as racist as well as misogynist. Moreover, this is a society in which they know that black same-race heterosexual relationships have been historically maligned as a matter of course. A prime example of this maligning can be seen reflected in the lasting influence of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 controversial study, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." In this document Moynihan characterizes black male-black female couple relationships as matriarchal rather than patriarchal and casts the gendered dynamics of such bonds in pathologized terms when compared with the gender and sexual dynamics of white same-race families. For this reason, an African American woman romance writer's depiction of black male and female lovers serves to portray an idealized imaginative space within which black women readers can contain their fears of racism—which frequently distorts black same-race heterosexual bonds—and therefore project their private (hetero)sexualized longings without having to be concerned about how those bonds will be portrayed. In other words, as Modelski suggests, black female readers of these works are already distanced enough from the plots of these novels to be able to see them for what they are: fictional correctives.

Another reason why contemporary black women writers may have turned to the romance genre to tell their own stories is that in romances the subject of racial politics and group struggle against whites in general is not required to be the *raison d'etre* of the genre. After all, in romances such conflicts are subordinated to, but not erased from, issues of personal longing and sexual fulfillment. As the critic B. Ruby Rich has suggested, "The advantage of romance as a launching pad for political engagement is that it carries built-in optimism, just possibly enough to move ahead in these times of race-hatred and scapegoating" (336). Quite frankly, readers of romances do not generally place the same political demand on their authors to contest societal inequalities as is the case with most so-called "serious" literary texts that make up the core of such oppositional discourses as the feminist and African American literary traditions. For instance, says black romance author Beverly Jenkins,

> Romance is a necessary part of life. But so many books about black people are studies in survival. Not everything has to be about the civil rights movement. I'm very proud of [the] "heaving bosoms" and "throbbing manhoods" [that I offer] to black women all over America! (qtd in Israel 153)

What Jenkins's remarks suggest is that, while many contemporary black women see themselves within a racially divided society, not all of these women's needs can be met through texts with only a racial focus. As evidenced by the imaginative reading strategies to which black women like Evelyn Palfrey resorted in the decades before explicitly black-theme romances were widely available, for most black women their psychological and emotional needs often *exceed* those directly related to racial politics. This is certainly the case with (hetero)sexual needs. But what about those black women readers of pre-black-themed romances who had learned to suppress their sexual attraction to white men as a condition of proving their loyalty to the race in general, and to black men in particular? Must these women once again repress that desire as a condition of their membership in the racial collective? And if so, what does this say about the state of their freedom as contemporary black women?

"But nobody had the right to question her love for him": Redefining Freedom for Black Women

This brings me to Patricia Hill Collins, who writes in her 1990 landmark volume, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* that "traditionally, relationships among black women and white men have long been constrained by the legacy of black women's sexual abuse by white men and the unresolved tensions this creates." Because of this extensive and brutal history, Collins argued at the time that "freedom for black women has meant freedom *from* white men, not the freedom to choose white men as lovers and friends" (191). Historically, black women who have chosen white men as lovers and companions have been vilified and often punished by the black community. We can see this over time in the verbal and physical retribution that has been visited upon black women who were perceived to violate the racial collective's unspoken, sometimes spoken, gender and sexual norms (see hooks 67-70; Mitchell 218-239). However, in a more recent book, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004), Collins identifies a "double standard" that, while present in earlier eras, has re-emerged in the post-civil rights era for black men and black women who date and marry interracially with whites. This double standard is a result of the contrasting ways in which black men and black women have been positioned historically in relation to narratives of racial progress. For while freedom for black women has been defined by their freedom to reject white men sexually

rather than to embrace them, freedom for black men has been defined as the freedom for these men to *choose*, without fear of white male retaliation, white women as lovers and wives. As Collins explains it:

> African American men were forbidden [under pain of death] to engage in sexual relations with all white women, let alone marry them. In this context, any expansion of the pool of female sexual partners enhances African American men's standing within the existing system of hierarchical masculinities. (262)

Collins's remarks dovetail neatly with Devon Carbado's analysis regarding the central role that race and gender played in high profile controversies involving such diverse black male figures as Mike Tyson, Clarence Thomas, and O. J. Simpson. Carbado argues that when blacks are perceived to be perpetrators of crime and must prove their guilt or innocence, for many African Americans the status of black men as "black" assumes a greater importance to them than whether or not the men are actually guilty of the crime with which they are charged. This is especially the case if white men and women are the victims of black men's alleged crimes. Hence, writes Carbado:

> O. J. Simpson's gender matters but Nicole Brown Simpson's does not. As a black man defending himself against the criminal justice system, Simpson represents what is black, and blackness is essentialized to represent who and what he is. He became, as it were, "the race"–and a symbol for racial injustice. In this context, black people view Simpson as *another black man being put down by the system,* or *another* famous *black man being put down by the system.* (165-166)

For some black women writers, deeply cognizant of this double standard for interracially coupled blacks, the act of affirming black women's freedom by simply depicting same-race heterosexual relationships between black women and black men is perhaps too limiting. This is the case because such depictions only amount to black women's *partial* freedom, since they accept the black communal norms that restrict black women's sexual choices in relation to the broader latitude allowed to black men. However, in choosing to author non-pathologized portrayals of mutually consenting romantic and sexual bonds between black women and white men, black women writers explicitly challenge the gendered sexual assumptions that Collins singles out as being so central to contemporary black civil society. In other words, these writers grant to their fictional heroines the same type of broad desiring prerogatives that black men assumed in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

As bell hooks has suggested, the historical and cultural taboo against interracial heterosexual intimacy on the part of the white dominant society, but

too on the part of black communities, has functioned in part to control and manage black women's freedom overall. According to hooks:

> Just as sexist white folks used the idea that all black men were rapists to limit the sexual freedom of white women, black people employ the same tactic to control black female sexual behavior. For many years, black people warned black females to beware involvement with white men for fear such relationships would lead to exploitation and degradation of black womanhood. While there is no need to deny the historical fact that white men have sexually exploited black women, this knowledge is used by the white and black public as a psychological weapon to limit and restrain the freedom of black females. (67)

As a consequence of such communal scare tactics, many contemporary black women have historically shied away from forming close personal as well as professional relationships with white men, and therefore they frequently experience a sense of discomfort, even crippling terror, when in the presence of white men in the workplace, at school, as well as in other everyday venues. Indeed, hooks has found that "[t]here are many black women who have as phobic a fear about white male sexuality as the fear white women have traditionally felt towards black men." However, as the author astutely reminds us, "Phobic fear is not a solution to the problem of sexual exploitation or rape. It is a symptom" (68).

Freud reminds us that, among other things, symptoms are the result of a compromise, in particular, as he puts it, "a compromise between the need for satisfaction and the need for punishment" (*Inhibitions* 98). As such, symptoms function primarily as "substitutions" for some traumatic experience that the unconscious deems too troubling and therefore bars from conscious thought, that is, represses (30). However, closely related to symptoms, for Freud, is anxiety—in fact, "these two represent and replace each other," but they are not interchangeable (*New Introductory* 83). Rather, Freud makes it clear that, in terms of chronology, anxieties predate symptoms, which function as their substitutes. In Freud's view, anxiety is closely situated to either a real or perceived danger, while the symptom that replaces it primarily comes about as a consequence of the subject removing him- or herself, or being moved, from this danger. As usual, Freud illustrates his creative speculations by way of real or hypothetical examples from his own and other analysts' clinical practices. In this case, he turns to the example of a patient who suffers from agoraphobia: the fear of open spaces. For Freud, agoraphobia initially begins for the patient when he goes outside. It is being outside that produces an anxiety attack, one that he knows would repeat "every time he went into the street again." Hence, as a result of this foreknowledge of anxiety, the agoraphobe develops the "*symptom* of agoraphobia" as a way of protecting himself from the anxiety he knows he will suffer if he does venture outside. Freud therefore concludes that

"the generation of anxiety is the earlier and the formation of symptoms the later of the two, as though the symptoms are created in order to avoid the outbreak of the anxiety state" (*New Introductory* 83-84; emphasis mine).

What I find provocative about Freud's discussion of symptoms as they relate to the anxieties they replace is the role the former plays in the formation of the ego's borders—as Freud puts it, symptoms lead to a "restriction of the ego's function"; in other words, an "inhibition" (83). As such, symptoms are not necessarily temporary psychic structures the way Freud sees them; rather, because they replace that which was already present, they acquire a morphological integrity that the subject internalizes and takes on in establishing his or her bodily character. Indeed, in discussing this process, Freud relies on a military metaphor that invokes the mental image of a fortress, "They [symptoms] are a kind of frontier-station with a mixed garrison," he writes. In elaborating on the seeming intransigence of a symptom, Freud goes on to state:

> The ego now proceeds to behave as though it recognized that the symptom had *come to stay* and that the only thing to do was to accept the situation in good part and draw as much advantage from it as possible. It makes an *adaptation* to the symptom—to this piece of the internal world which is alien to it—just as it normally does to the real external world. (*Inhibitions* 99; emphasis mine)

Here, Freud suggests that in adapting to the symptom and deriving an "advantage" from it, the subject accommodates him- or herself to the symptom in a way that is not only unreflective but also—and this is crucial to the argument I'm trying to make—self-preservative. In a word, the symptom is quickly naturalized as part and parcel of the subject's own identity formation as a way to ward off further anxiety. In fact, the symptom becomes indistinguishable from that identity so that, eventually, the symptom *is* the identity. The reason Freud gives for why this is possible has to do with the ego's belief that the symptom offers "protection" of some sort—as Freud puts it when discussing a patient who was prevented from creating a symptom to replace an obsessive washing ritual: "he falls into a state of anxiety which he finds hard to tolerate and from which he had evidently been *protected* by his symptom" (*Inhibitions* 83).

How, then, borrowing Freud's analysis, might we come to see contemporary black women's phobic fear of white men as lovers and companions—especially when that fear is rendered semiotically, through plot, character, and dialogue—as operating through a similarly unreflective and self-preservationist logic of protection? If it is true that, as bell hooks has suggested, black women's rejection of white men today (a rejection anchored in phobic fear) functions as a "symptom" that has come to replace the historical "anxiety" of sexual exploitation and rape—a symptom that these women perceive as *protecting*

them from having to suffer a similar trauma and which therefore has become a permanent part of their identity as black women—how would such an obsession ultimately be resolved, assuming of course that one *wanted* to resolve it, someone like, say, a character in a literary text, for instance? For his part, Freud suggests that an individual might resolve this obsession by "find[ing] the path back to the memory of a traumatic experience" ("The Aetiology of Hysteria" 195). Lest we forget, the characters in the vast majority of black-authored literary texts are figures that acknowledge rather than deny "the material circumstances of racial oppression" and its psychological effects on black subjects, effects that are frequently experienced as traumatic memory—their own or someone else's (Tate 4). Likewise, plots of black-authored novels are signifiers of those events as filtered through the very acknowledgment of such trauma. Indeed, as Claudia Tate puts it, "the modern black text functions like a racially sensitive psychotherapist"; in other words, such works teach black readers to recognize "the parameters of the negative, racist and patriarchal boundaries which traditionally define [black people]" and to dare "to step outside of them" so as "to understand their own individuality, worth and ability [and] utilize inner strengths in the service of growing and coping" (Tate 17-18).

Regarding the plots of *interracial* romances in particular, I would say that the black female protagonist's rejection of white men as suitors is structured by this same textual knowledge. This means that black female characters, like many black women in real life on whom these characters are modeled, are vested textually with the memory of racist white men sexually abusing black female bodies with impunity, a memory many of these characters experience as traumatic. It is this memory that is debarred from consciousness, as in: "That can't happen to me." However, once repressed, the memory returns in the form of a symptom, causing these female characters to behave and speak in ways that textually demonstrate their *a priori* rejection of white men as possible lovers and companions, as in: "This *won't* happen to me." As if following to the letter Freud's suggestion about self-healing through an imaginative restaging, rhetorically the text reenacts the trauma of rape and sexual exploitation through the displacement of that trauma onto the protagonist's active avoidance of white men, a rejection that then gets renarrativized as the black female character's strong racial identification, rather than what it is at base: fear. When another black female character shows Lacie of Lizzette Carter's *The Color Line* photos of her family, for example, complete with white husband and mixed-race children—the clear implication being that Lacie too might consider such a relationship—the protagonist's fear (a fear masked as disgust) is evident: "Carrie, you have a lovely family and I'm very happy for you, but I can't do this. That's not for me. I date black men. I always have" (Carter 55). In order to resolve this psychic dilemma of neurotic avoidance, the text of the interracial

romance is driven, as a motor drives an engine, to hurl these characters along a vertiginous path that will deliver them straight to the very source of their anxiety in order to resolve it: white men themselves.

Because the formulaic structure of the romance novel is primarily rooted in conflict—and usually conflict that is gendered rather than gendered *and* raced, which I suggest is the case with these novels—the genre offers contemporary writers a ready-made literary form upon which to engage the pain and degradation that such relationships have historically caused for black women outside the text. Hence, the novels are structured, i.e. plotted, to be therapeutic in that they are organized in such a way as to enable a cathartic release on the part of their protagonists, as well as, if successful, on the parts of their faithful readers—whatever these readers' race, gender, or sexual identities may be. Such texts allow the protagonist to confront the stigma of interracial desire where contemporary black women are concerned. But then they also enable these women to turn what may be experienced as a stigma into an occasion for self-affirmation and independence. How these novels achieve this, I've tried to argue, is by redefining the notion of black women's freedom in terms of their relationships to white men. Instead of freedom for black women being defined, as Collins puts it, by the fact that black women successfully manage to *elude* the sexual interests of white men, these characters come to redefine their freedom by embracing the knowledge that they are just as free to reject or accept the sexual interests of white men as they are free to reject or accept the sexual interests of black men. The decision to do so is entirely their own. It neither belongs to their parents, to their brothers, to their close friends, to their co-workers, nor to society. If, as Janice Radway writes, "the romance . . . is never simply a love story, [but] also an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women" (75), then I would say that the *interracial* romance is both a love story and an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy *and* racism specifically for *black* women living in radically changed times in which the past is not easily repressed.

Homophobia vs. Mixophobia: The Same-Race, Different Gender Rule

Like their same-race counterparts, black-authored interracial romances all involve black female protagonists as they search for love and wholeness in a world that is not only hostile to women, but that is also hostile to black people in general. A defining feature of these narratives is that the black female protagonist is not only psychologically unprepared to become sexually and emotionally involved with a white man over the long term, no matter how handsome and charming this man may be, but that she is also at some level

psychologically *unwilling* to become involved with him in this way as well. The reasons for this unwillingness are both personal and collective. While one of the implicit goals of such narratives is to break down the protagonist's strong, personal resistance to interracial intimacy so that she may finally confront and overcome her fears about white men as intimates, certainly another goal of these novels is to assist this character in overcoming any additional fears she may have about letting down the racial group to which she feels an abiding responsibility.

For example, in Monica White's 1996 debut novel, *Shades of Desire,* the protagonist expresses her personal resistance to black-white coupling in the book's very first paragraph. In this novel, a professional black woman, Jasmine Smith, goes out one night to a mixed-race dance club with three of her closest African American girlfriends to celebrate her twenty-sixth birthday. One of these women, Taylor, who is also the protagonist's roommate, has been in a long-term but rocky relationship with a white man whose parents disapprove of his committed relationship with a black woman. As the novel's first-person narrator, Jasmine quickly distances herself from her roommate's sexuality by informing the reader that although she likes Cameron well enough and can understand what Taylor "sees in him," she nonetheless concludes that "the problems black woman/white man [relationships] cause are [too large of a] price to pay for love." As she puts it, "*personally*, I didn't think I could do it" (1; emphasis mine). Interestingly, Jasmine does not clarify what she means when she admits to understanding what it is that Taylor "sees" in Cameron. Does this mean that *she* also finds Cameron to be sexually attractive? Or does it simply mean that she thinks he is a nice person? The fact that Jasmine does not explicitly *say* what she means points up the extent to which she may feel constrained in being able to admit, even to herself, whether or not she finds Cameron attractive because he is white.

I suggest that the discomfort the protagonist exhibits in being unable to acknowledge if she finds a particular white man handsome or not is structurally similar to, though ultimately different from, a type of discomfort some heterosexual men, regardless of race, may feel when they are asked if they find another *man* attractive. After all, in a heterosexual man's mind, to admit to someone that he finds another man attractive is tantamount to admitting that he would like to sleep with that man. Obviously, if he were to admit to such a thing, then he would be leaving himself open, in a heterosexist society, to the culturally damning charge that he is a "homosexual." And this would be the case even if he is *not* homosexual but resolutely heterosexual. By the same logic, if a contemporary black woman were to admit to someone, especially to someone black, that she found a particular white man attractive, it would be tantamount to admitting that she would like to sleep with him, or at the very least that she would like to date him. Such an admission would therefore open her, in a racially divided society, to the culturally damning charge, at least within the black community, that she is an "interracialist," i.e. a person of color who dates whites. In contemporary black antiracist discourse, a black person's admission of attraction to a white person can often lead to questions about what "kind" of black person he or she is. This is because in such discourse to admit, if you are black, to finding even a *single* white person attractive encourages people to suspect—and these "people" are always other blacks—that, on the one hand, you find *all* white people attractive and, on the other, that you do not find *any* black people attractive (see Barnard 47-51; Scott 299-300). In other words, the same dichotomous logic that operates in our society to prevent a heterosexual man from verbally acknowledging that he finds another man attractive can be seen to structure the erotic situation between a black heterosexual woman and a white heterosexual man. This would explain why Palfrey felt that she had to "pretend" the white protagonists of the historical romance novels she read as a youth were black, since had they been white, which they were, her enjoyment of these texts would have targeted her as both self-hating and sexually deviant.

For Collins, such constraints serve to illustrate what she refers to as the "same-race, different gender rule." These are largely unspoken rules that establish societal norms for romantic and sexually intimate bonds within the contemporary U.S. In relation to race and gender, these rules work through a "logic of segregation" that requires black and white men and women to choose intimate partners in ways that are in keeping with our culture's heterosexist and racially homogamous norms (248). For example, for black men to satisfy these norms they must choose black women for partners and neither other black men, white men, nor white women, whereas white women, on the other hand, must choose white men for partners over black men, black women, or other white women. I suggest that the practice of giving voice to such "rules," as Jasmine does when she tells the reader that *she* personally could not date a white man, serves another function as well. After all, as any reader of interracial romances knows, the protagonist *will* become involved with just such a man—in fact, she will eventually fall in love with him, to the surprise and dismay of her friends and family alike. Therefore, this preemptive rejection of any possible cross-racial, heterosexual attraction must be seen to serve a purpose other than simply voicing her "true" desires. This statement can be interpreted not as a declaration of the protagonist's impossible attraction to a white man (after all, such an attraction is certainly possible physiologically), but rather as her effort to assert at the outset a strong racial identification as a contemporary black woman to "protect" herself in the same way that Freud describes the hypothetical patient's obsessive washing ritual serves as protection. While the two things are not

necessarily mutually exclusive—a black woman with a strong racial identification can certainly be attracted to a white man without necessarily compromising that identification—the cultural mythology that circulates about interracial intimacy, especially in the black community, is so overdetermined as to make the two *seem* mutually exclusive, even if they are not.

Therefore, in order for her to affirm her identity as a proud black woman in culturally intelligible ways, and most importantly not to be punished by the racial collective for that attraction (which she knows she will be if she does not give up, i.e. repress, that attraction), the protagonist must eventually repudiate the compromise she struck when she first acquired the symptom of preemptively repudiating white men as possible lovers and confidantes. She does this within interracial romances by asserting strong "I" statements, such as, "personally I didn't think I could do it." For clearly the protagonist *can* do it; she just *won't*. Because she insists on taking this stance and holding to it so firmly, the protagonist of the interracial romance must be made to suffer, as Jasmine suffers, through a series of trials in which she eventually proves that the two things—being a proud black person and loving someone white—are not incompatible. Some of these trials, which we find represented as part of the plot of interracial romances, include the protagonist having to endure public scrutiny of her relationship through unwanted stares; criticism and possible rejection from family and friends; the protagonist's own concerns as to how her own racial identity will be affected by being interracially coupled; the fear of discrimination in the workplace as a result of her relationship, which may lead interracially coupled blacks to conceal their relationship from co-workers; random acts of verbal hostility and violence from disapproving others; and potential parenthood to mixed-race children—all of which are experiences that revisionist social science researchers have associated with the challenges faced by contemporary interracial couples (see Childs 2005; Dalmage 2002; Killian 2002; Rosenblatt 1995).

In *Language and Sexuality* (2003), Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick would call speech acts like Jasmine's "performative," in that speech of this type functions most often to secure the boundaries of the speakers' own identity in relation to the identity of someone they deem to be sexually different from themselves. For example, in their discussion of a group of five fraternity brothers, all of whom regard themselves as heterosexual, gossiping about the potential homosexuality of other men they suspect of being gay, Cameron and Kulick write that in addition to this gossip being homophobic, it also serves to help these men negotiate "a danger that cannot be acknowledged: the possibility of homosexual desire within the speakers' own homosocial group." Hence, by invoking homosexuality as something dissimilar from rather than like themselves, these men are able to "locate homosexual desire outside the group, in the bodies of absent others" (122). In so doing, they manage to contain, if only temporarily, the threat homosexuality poses to their own fragile sense of identity as heterosexual. According to Judith Butler, setting up contrasts of this type outside the subjective self "requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject," in this case, gay men. To the five fraternity brothers, the absent gay men "constitute the site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which" they are able to stake their "own claim to autonomy and life" as privileged heterosexuals, i.e. as *not* abject but normative. In other words, the fraternity brothers are able to claim they are straight precisely because, to them, the other men are gay or are perceived to be. But the solidity of these subjective boundaries turns out merely to be illusory. "In this sense," writes Butler:

> the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation. (3)

Put differently, the subject is simultaneously the person he thinks himself to be *and* the person he most loathes; the former is made possible, buoyed up even, by the ghosted presence of the latter.

What I have been suggesting is that we can see evidence of a similar dialectic of exclusion and abjection at work, with race as the privileged term instead of gender, within interracial romances as well. In *Shades of Desire* this dialectic reveals itself in Jasmine's insistence that although Taylor is willing to transgress societal norms by dating interracially, it is not something that she is "personally" willing to do. By separating herself from what she perceives to be her roommate's racialized sexual difference (i.e., Taylor dates white men, the narrator does not), Jasmine hopes, in Cameron and Kulick's words, to "know [herself] as normal" (122)—and for African American heterosexuals "normal" sexuality involves adhering to the "same-race" portion of the hegemonic rule of desire to which Collins refers. Jasmine does this by repudiating what she believes to be an historically dangerous form of desire (black women coupled with white men) in favor of embracing what she believes to be its contemporary corrective (black women coupled with black men), which she views as not only self-affirming, but also group-affirming. While this last point is invoked but quickly dismissed in White's novel—the book is after all only 134 pages and moves rather swiftly, almost mechanically, through the range of challenges that contemporary interracial couples often endure on its way to a happy conclusion—this dual dilemma is treated with far more narrative complexity in other interracial romances, such as in Dyanne Davis's *The Color of Trouble* (2003) and Lizzette Carter's *The Color Line* (2005). In the former, the black

female protagonist, Kari Thomas, ends her long engagement to her white fiancé ostensibly because of what she believes to be his infidelity, but really because of her deep, psychological fear of giving birth to mixed-race children, who represent to her a permanent estrangement from black people and from blackness itself. As the novel puts it:

> She [Kari] summoned up the image of her perfect circle of brown-skinned babies. And she prayed those babies would help her forget Jonathan Steele and her love for him. (224)

On the other hand, in Carter's *The Color Line,* the novel's protagonist, Lacie Adams, manages to keep her strong feelings for her white male boss at bay by cultivating a serious relationship with a black male entrepreneur who is every bit as successful as his white male counterpart, but whom she does not love. A key refrain in this novel at least—uttered by other characters, never by the protagonist herself—is the following: "Why would [a black woman] want to go with a rich white man when [she] can have a rich black man?" (100, 296). What is implied in such crude formulations is the black cultural belief that, all things being equal, heterosexual black women are better off with black men as opposed to white men. The problem with such thinking of course is that it acquiesces to the dominant cultural logic of segregation in maintaining rigid and exclusionary boundaries between "black" and "white" people, against which scores of African American and white antiracist activists fought so long and hard during the 1950s and '60s, and for which many of them gave their lives. This belief reinforces rather than challenges the racist ideology of "separate but equal" by essentializing differences between blacks and whites, that is, characterizing such differences as immutable and based in biology rather than culture. Furthermore, such an ideology is chiefly responsible for generating a host of deforming effects upon the lives of African Americans in ways that exceed the merely "racial," such as the cultural belief that black men have greater sexual stamina than white men, or that black women are naturally more fertile than white women.

By insisting that black women confine their sexual and romantic relationships to black men only, advocates of the same-race, different gender rule seek to reshape historical knowledge of just how the identity categories "black" and "white" were forged in the first place through a host of concerted disciplinary practices, including socially constructed laws against black-white sex and intimacy, elaborate and highly variable models of racial classification, and through the regulatory use of terrorizing violence. As a way to challenge such discourse, a crucial point that writers like Alice Walker and James Baldwin, among others, have often tried to impress upon Americans is that the relationship between blacks and whites is one of blood kin and not of indifferent

strangers (see Baldwin, *Collected Essays* 32; Walker 540-541). But thus far such a lesson has been a difficult one for most of us to learn.

Cameron and Kulick, in regards to gender, not race, reach a similar conclusion as Walker and Baldwin. Referring once again to the five fraternity brothers, the authors write:

> the way the straight men talk about the bodies of the despised/disavowed gay men suggests that what they claim to be repelled by is also (as a psychoanalyst might predict) a source of fascination. (122)

Moreover, this fascination can further be unmasked as an anxiety that what these men repudiate as outside themselves, same-sex desire, is, in actuality, both inside and outside simultaneously. Although Cameron and Kulick, and to a lesser extent Butler as well, privilege a hetero-homosexual binary model of desire and identification in their formulations, we might be led to wonder if similar "exclusionary logics" can be said to structure the cultural opposition between interracial and intraracial sexuality as well. While references to "race" frequently fall out of Butler's often brilliant efforts to theorize the psychic displacements that structure sexual subjectivities within a society organized around an imaginary belief in oedipalization, she nonetheless is astute enough to recognize that complexity of the symbolic exceeds gendered affiliations. In other words, can what these theorists have to say about homophobic straight men also be said, or at least be thought, about "mixophobic" heterosexual black women like Kari Thomas from *The Color of Trouble,* Lacie Adams from *The Color Line,* and to a lesser extent, Jasmine Smith from White's *Shades of Desire*? Certainly the black British filmmaker and theorist Isaac Julien would say so. In a provocative 1994 essay, Julien states the following, "The upholding of an essential black identity is dependent upon an active avoidance of the psychic reality of black/white desire" (125). Might the same be true of the black women in these novels as well? After all, it is not long after the narrator of *Shades of Desire* rejects interracial intimacy as a personal option for herself, while hesitatingly approving of it for her roommate, that she first meets the white man who will eventually become her husband. However, instead of rejecting this man's sudden invitation to dance, she practically throws herself into his arms. Indeed, given the narrator's strong rejection moments earlier to white men as romantic partners, it comes as something of a surprise to find that Jasmine does not vehemently refuse his invitation. What is it that accounts for the contradictory behavior the black female protagonists all exhibit in these narratives?

In her article, "Dating White: When Sisters Go There," Rachel Blakely argues that contemporary black women do not primarily reject white men because these men are white. In fact, black women are just as sexually curious

about white men's whiteness as white men are curious about black women's blackness. Rather, what presents the greatest stumbling block to large numbers of black women willing to forge intimate bonds with white men is what Blakely calls the almost "schizophrenic" array of conflicting emotions many of these women continue to have where white men are concerned (149). As I stated at the outset, for many black women today, white men as a group still remain a risky proposition. As a black female character in a James Baldwin novel puts it when asked if she hates white people (ironically, this character is interracially involved at the time), "If any *one* white person gets through to you, it kind of destroys your single-mindedness. They say love and hate are very close together. Well, that's a fact" (Baldwin, *Another Country* 350). In other words, many contemporary black women feel the necessity of being constantly on their guard with white men; this is the case even with white men they may be sleeping with. And although it is certainly true that white men today hardly represent the monolithic cabal they once did in previous eras, at least as far as blacks are concerned, they are nonetheless various enough in their politicized astuteness regarding racial inequities to be a wildly unpredictable bunch. Therefore, it can be dangerous for any black woman to trust any white man too easily or, for that matter, too quickly. This point is echoed by Blakely, who writes, "In all the conversations I have had with black women, the strongest feeling they seem to conjure up about white men isn't love or hate. It's ambivalence" (149).

For Freud, the term "ambivalence" is often a code word for a deviation in the normative sexual aim. The central deviance within much of psychoanalysis is, of course, homosexuality. The notion of "ambivalence" is therefore intimately tied up with the very human process of sexual differentiation that Freud saw reflected in the Oedipal complex, and which Steven Angelides has referred to as an "allegory for the universalized account of human psychosexual development" (54). Although Freud does employ the concept of ambivalence elsewhere, the term seems to be most often identified with the tortuous path all human beings must travel before ideally taking up stable and fixed identity positions in the interlocking binary sex/gender system governed by the dyads male/female, masculine/feminine and heterosexuality/homosexuality. Ambivalence emerges for Freud at the precise moment when, in this case, the little boy begins to transform his polymorphous desires for his parents by distinguishing between at least two forms of desire: (1) his desire-for (his mother) and (2) his desire-to-be (his father). In making this distinction, the little boy becomes dimly aware that somehow he has managed to retain dual and contradictory attachments to his father, but not his mother. The attachments come in the form of affection and aggression, its diametric opposite. "Here, then," writes Freud, "we have a conflict due to ambivalence: a well-grounded love and a no less justifiable hatred directed towards one and the same person" (*Inhibitions* 102). However, Rachel Blakely's use of the derivation "ambivalence" in her discussion of the contradictory feelings some contemporary black women have about the white men in their lives cannot be properly explained by turning to Freud's gender-centric, though race-neutral, understanding of the subject's psychosexual development. In other words, his is an allegory that produces no meaning for this particular narrative account of sexual development, which is both gendered and overtly racialized.

Or does it?

As my earlier discussion of the Herculean strategies to which some black women resorted in order to enjoy reading romances before black-themed romances were widely available would suggest, black women *have* loved white men in the past, just as the polymorphous perverse little boy had loved his father as much as he had loved his mother; they just have not done so *openly*, or, in Palfrey's case, self-knowingly. For these black women, their love for white men was already present from the start, set up, as it were, as a "founding repudiation," one that forms the "constitutive outside" of their identities as strong black women. But might the same be true of a great many other black women, and for people of color in general, who did not hungrily consume romance novels as young people? For as Isaac Julien laments, "in this Western culture we have all grown up as snow queens—straights, as well as white queers." This is the case, Julien argues, because "Western culture is in love with its own (white) image" (125). While Julien may overstate the case somewhat, his point is certainly thought-provoking and worth some consideration, especially his claim that this "love of whiteness" is not to be associated with people of color exclusively, that white people themselves are narcissistically attached to whiteness *qua* whiteness. However, with the arrival of the discourses of black affirmation, such cross-racial affections were no longer politically tenable for people of color. Black women's desires for white men had to be repressed or risk punishment, even if indulged privately, just as the little boy's desire for his father, in his journey toward normative masculinity and heterosexual manhood, had to be repressed or else the boy would be subject to a similar rebuke. And just as the little boy developed "ambivalent," i.e. love/hate, feelings for his father, so too, I argue, have contemporary black women similarly developed love/hate feelings for white men—feelings that they are not socially sanctioned to vocalize without enduring the corresponding and character-assassinating charge that they are "interracialists," and therefore "unblack," traitors to the race, self-haters, the list goes on.

In depicting modern-day black women as they wrestle with the societal constraints of the "same-race, different gender rule," contemporary interracial romances remind us all of the socially constructed nature of desire, the point

being that we are not free to desire whomever or however we would like; we have to carve out that freedom against a host of constraints. There are always consequences for desires that "cross the line" between what is considered normative and non-normative at any one time and place, a point that most theorists have not always pursued as expansively as they might. After all, writes Judith Butler, every subject is

> constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine but what remains radically unthinkable: in the domain of sexuality these constraints include the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise, the radical unendurability of desiring otherwise, the absence of certain desires, the repetitive compulsion of others, the abiding repudiation of some sexual possibilities, panic, obsessional pull, and the nexus of sexuality and pain. (94)

While most readers in the West are generally accustomed to seeing such struggles played out within the context of a heterosexual-homosexual binary model of desire, I have been arguing in this essay that such struggles take place elsewhere as well, especially when black subjects are centered.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by returning to Peter Brooks, who reminds us that "[m]ost viable works of literature tell us something about how they are to be read, guide us toward the conditions of their interpretation" (xii). If this is so, then it is not difficult to imagine that many of these romances have something to teach us about how to accommodate ourselves to this sudden shift in the reconceptualization of racialized sexual freedom in a post-civil rights world, and not only as this freedom pertains to black women, but, really, as it pertains to all of us. After all, the total sum of sexual options for any one human being does not fall neatly between the poles of *either* heterosexuality *or* homosexuality. Such a belief only obscures the sheer complexity of human sexuality as it is constructed and lived out in a heteropatriarchal society also structured by racial hierarchies. It becomes just as important, then, for scholars to focus our efforts on making visible forms of sexuality that exist *within* these binary oppositions themselves. Put differently, just as there is not only one form of heterosexuality but heterosexualit*ies* (i.e. same-race, mixed-race, cross-class, multicultural, intergenerational, interfaith, etc.), there is not only one form of homosexuality but homosexualit*ies*. The tendency for contemporary scholars to privilege a heterosexual-homosexual binary model for making sense of sexual diversity unfortunately keeps whiteness at the center of what is nonetheless highly productive critical work, while continuing to marginalize and other the experiences of large numbers of people of color for whom racial identification

comprises a significant part of their sense of self. When scholars revise our critical paradigms for thinking about sexual diversity in this way, we open the door for posing the types of questions that help us to more accurately comprehend the sexual lives of people of color, and not just "whites."

While I would say that every black woman suffers from the historical devaluation of black womanhood that bell hooks has argued is a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, not all black women experience this legacy in the exact same way. While some black women choose to respond to this race/gender devaluation by forming powerful, restorative heterosexual bonds with black men, other black women choose to form fulfilling same-sex romantic relationships with other women of color. Still, some black women defy historical precedent even further by entering into romantic partnerships with white men and white women, as if directly confronting the fear of whiteness somehow reverses the degradation and stigma that black women have inherited as a result of these historical wrongs of the past. However, black men and women who choose to enter into intimate relationships with whites have been vilified by other blacks for being race traitors at best and self-haters at worst. Unlike lesbians and gay men of color, who since the late 1970s have developed a rich literary and cultural tradition of validating their unique desiring identities, blacks who are interracially coupled with whites are in the early stages of developing a "reverse discourse" with which to validate and affirm their own sexual object-choices; these choices are based also on race rather than on "just" gender. As a result of this ongoing work, scholars need to devise more nuanced interpretive frameworks. Although the contemporary romance novel may initially seem an unlikely textual site upon which to analyze one set of black women's responses to traumatic historical events, this essay has argued that no other literary form has thus far attempted to take up the vexed question of interracial sex as it relates to black women with the commitment and purpose of some of the novels I have explored here. With the exception of a handful of black women's literary texts that appeared in the post-Civil Rights era, and that explored the subject of interracial intimacy in unconventional ways, the subject of contemporary black women's sexual relationship to white men largely comprises an unmapped terrain within the mainstream African American literary canon. The emergence of interracial romances, especially those written by black women, makes it incumbent on scholars of black literature, as well as scholars of human sexuality, to rethink their founding paradigms so as to include variables that recognize the complex dimensions of black women's lives in particular and black people's lives in general.

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