

## Against Odds: Beverly Jenkins' *Indigo* and Black Historical Romance

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Invited to provide a companion essay to the Black Romance Podcast's interview with romance author Beverly Jenkins, I was honored, nervous, and excited (fangirling actually). An acclaimed romance author of more than twenty historical romances, several contemporary romantic suspense novels, and the acclaimed *Blessings* series, Jenkins may rightly be viewed as a standard bearer for Black Romance. She is the recipient of some of the romance community's highest awards, such as the 2017 Romance Writers of America Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award and the 2016 Romantics Reviewers Choice Award for Historical Romance. She has "been nominated for the NAACP Image Award in Literature, was featured both in the documentary *Love Between the Covers* and on CBS *Sunday Morning*, and has garnered accolades from the likes of the *Wall Street Journal*, *People Magazine*, and *NPR*" (Moody-Freeman).

As I began to write this essay, several daunting questions immediately presented themselves: What can one say about the incomparable Beverly Jenkins that hasn't already

been said or written, I asked myself? What might I add to illustrate not just a remarkable literary career but the magic of Jenkins' canon? Re-listening to her Black Romance Podcast interview and re-reading my favorite Jenkins' novel, *Indigo*, I realized the best affirmation I could offer was to not rehearse the biographical and publishing success of Beverly Jenkins but to focus on the literary text itself. In other words, it seemed best to critically and political situate *Indigo* as romance literature, and more specifically Black historical romance.

Before I turn to a brief discussion of *Indigo*, I want to outline my thinking about the novel. From the moment I read the romance I was struck by its engagement with the issues of racism, socioeconomic class, and colorism in *Indigo*. The other dynamic I found fascinating were the contours of historical narration that thematically inscribed themselves into the storyline. In many ways, all romance novels are "historical" in that authors represent some form of the past (personal, societal, racial, and cultural) woven into the lives of their characters. What marks the historical romance is its reliance on a particular notion of the "past"; a past that is easily recognizable as located in an already-having-occurred temporality usually measured in centuries or decades removed from the author and the readers' lived experiences. In this context I want to suggest that seeing "history" and "romance" as an intersecting narrative and contextual trope offers an insightful way to engage Jenkins' *Indigo* in particular and her take on the Black Romance canon in general.

## Writing Black/African American History into the Romance Genre

Romance fiction is built on and survives by its use of tropes, whether that trope is the first kiss, mistaken identity, or the 'great' misunderstanding. What is often not viewed as a fundamental trope within the romance genre, or on the same level as these other tropes, is the idea of *historical authenticity*. I want to begin by suggesting that the romance notion of "historical authenticity" should not be confused with the academic discipline "History" since, as Hayden White argues, the term "*history* is the signifier of a concept rather than a reference to a thing or domain of being having material presence" (x). As White suggests,

This concept may have as its signified either 'the past' or something like 'temporal process' but these, too, are concepts rather than things. Neither has material presence. Both are known only by way of 'traces' or material entities which indicate not so much what the things that produced them were, as, rather, the fact that 'something' passed by a certain place or did something in that place. What it was that had passed by or what it had done in that place will remain a mystery, the solution to which may be inferred or intuited, but the nature of which must remain conjectural— indeed, must remain a possibility only and therefore a 'fiction' (x).

In other words, writing history, whether in literary form or as evidential "fact," is nothing more than the fictionalized representation of a past that can only be conjectural. This is especially true in the case of historical romance which is dependent on the historian's

“conjectures,” which in themselves are small element of a society’s complex economic, political, and culture systems. And often, the historians who claim the accuracy of their facts or details often fail to note what is ignored by design. In the end, when romance writers choose these facts or details they get recirculated time and again until the account and representation of people and events become gospel as “authentic” history.

As scholars of the romance genre and its subgenres, therefore, we should challenge the narrowness of what is considered “historical” romance but also whose “history” is being inscribed – one of the more vexing readerly issues that Black romance authors face when writing historical romance novels. In tying her historical romances to the representation of Black love and Black communities before and after the US Civil War, Jenkins offer an historical narrative about the impact of white supremacy on African peoples in the United States. When Beverly Jenkins submitted the manuscript *Night Song* to various romance publishers, she came up against the question of authentic history. As she wryly comments,

so, in New York’s mind and in probably most of the country, when you write a 19th century story, featuring Black people, it should center on slavery. So here I come with this story, 19th century, Black people, living in a small town on the plains of Kansas, and they are like ‘Huh? What do we do with this?’ So nobody knew what to do with it. They loved the writing, they loved the concept but there was no box for it, even though it was romance (Moody-Freeman).

Yet, as Jenkins rightfully indicates, her romances are steeped in:

American history. It’s a way to teach American history with all its warts and with all its bitterness, and there’s no test on Friday, but you learn as you read. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was probably one of the most horrendous acts ever passed in American history. And even more horrific about it was that the magistrate would pay the hunters more if the slave went back than if the slave didn’t go back. So, if you brought a case to the court, and they find that the slave hunter is right, then you make a lot of money, not a lot of money, but you make more than—and I’m like ‘really?’ You had a mass exodus in places like New York and Philadelphia, people leaving the country because of how horrendous the act was because nobody wanted to go. I mean they were snatching people up who had been free for generations. You didn’t have to be a fugitive slave; you just had to be Black (Moody-Freeman).

In making this point, we have to ask what goes unsaid? Had Jenkins written a romance set in Regency England or nineteenth-century United States or the Caribbean and depicted the harsh conditions enslavement imposed on the lives and loves of African peoples, as well as the genocide that came with the white settling of Americas, would her romance have been viewed as more authentic? Would detailing Black peoples’ trauma (something pre-1980s historical romances often did) have sold more romance novels? What Jenkins resisted, and the few contemporary Black authors who write historical romances resist, is a recirculation of a troubling and ahistorical portrait of Black

insufficiency (Dandridge). Instead, what Jenkins marks as ‘historical’ in *Indigo* is not just Black peoples’ sufficiency but also Black subjectivity unmediated by an a priori white gaze. What I mean by ‘unmediated by an a priori white gaze’ is the idea that Jenkins’ storytelling is intended for a Black readership first and foremost. Even as she engages with the politics of colorism, class ideologies, and gendered ideals of femininity, Jenkins refuses to set whiteness as the measure of her romance novels. Simply put, *Indigo*, as do all of Jenkins’ historical romance novels, unrepentantly rejects Black trauma porn.

Jenkins’s world-building in her historical romance novels is bracketed by a pair of events, the US Revolutionary War and the US Civil War, and the long-term social, economic, and political effects of both on the lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants. In this, she is no different than her Regency/Victorian historical romance peers who contextualize their romances in relation to the Napoleonic Wars and the decades after. While any one of Jenkins’ novels would serve as an illustrative example of her resistance to ahistorical perceptions of the lives, loves and communities of US Black people, I focus on *Indigo*, first published in 1996 and reissued with additional material in 2014. Set a few years before the US Civil War begins, *Indigo* is a beautifully written story of Black love, Black liberation, and Black community. In what becomes a hallmark of Jenkins’ narrative and literary style, the “history” of the novel is both “authentic” (drawn from archival records and history texts) and a fictionalizing trope mediated through Hester’s purple feet and hands that is skillfully woven into the fabric of the romance between Galen and Hester. As *Indigo*’s readers discover, while for Hester and Galen the markers of racial identity, colorism and class privileges, and the gendering of race and class are embroidered into their daily lives as reflections of white supremacy, this is never accorded centrality as the lens through which we read.

### “Those purple hands really intrigued me”

According to Jenkins, *Indigo* was inspired by Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (Moody-Freeman) and the sea islands off the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The novel takes place several years before the onset of the US Civil War. Rita Dandridge observes,

[*Indigo*] vividly dramatizes the abolitionist movement as the historic setting which called black women to action. Set in Whittaker, Michigan, in 1858, the novel introduces a year in the critical second phase of the movement—a time calling for immediate rather than gradual freedom for black people. The North became the flight destination of fugitive slaves, many of whom were welcomed by free black women who had themselves at one time been slaves (32).

While I agree the romance novel historicizes the abolitionist and liberation struggle that mark Jenkins’ historical romances, I also believe *Indigo* also has much to say about colorism, class, and romance – all of which are complicated dynamics connected to African enslavement. The novel opens with a heartbreaking pair of letters penned by David Wyatt

to his sister. A non-enslaved Black man, Wyatt writes, “for the love of a woman named Frances Greaton, I have forsaken all I am and given my freedom over to her master” (Jenkins 1). In effect, as Wyatt notes, “I am a slave now.” He then goes on to declare, “to be near her I would carry water to hell.” As we read David’s letters, we learn that he is a learned man, a property owner, and most likely a ship’s navigator. In his second letter to his sister, David reports that “his worst fears have come true”; the man he sold himself to has died and Greaton’s son has sold Wyatt’s beloved Frances and their daughter Hester separately. Wyatt begs his sister to find his daughter, even using his “land and monies to secure Hester’s freedom” (Jenkins 2). Dying of a “wasting disease,” David tells his sister how to identify Hester and that all his wealth, money, and properties are to be held in trust for his daughter.

Hester’s story begins twenty-five years later (1858) with the arrival of “visitors” to her house in Whittaker, Michigan. Upon the death of her aunt Katherine, Hester inherited the property her father bequeathed her as well her aunt’s abolitionist work. An educated woman, Hester lives a rather orderly life. Promised to the local school teacher, Foster Quint, upon his return from England, Hester’s life is framed by her dedication to helping the escaped enslaved make their way to a free life in Michigan or Canada and her preparation to be a good wife. A single night changes not only Hester’s political life but her sheltered life as well.

When a badly injured man, disguised as a woman, is one of the visitors brought to her house during a fierce storm, Hester does not hesitate to take care of him. Hester is a no-nonsense woman and, upon learning the man concealed in her house is “The Black Daniel” a legendary figure integral to the Underground Railroad, she makes it her goal is to see the injured man back to health and his mission. Her compassion overrides any concerns about the danger the man poses to her safety and the enslaved she aids and, of course, the Black Daniel throws a rub in the middle of Hester’s carefully constructed personal life. The reader’s first image of Galen Vachon, however, is not that of a handsome hero but of a badly beaten man “dressed and rouged like a woman” whose “injuries had drained the color from his mulatto-gold complexion” (Jenkins 6). My initial thought on reading this sentence was, what exactly does “mulatto-gold” look like, and what a wonderful bit of wordplay on the pernicious economic effects of colorism and its ties to enslavement.

Robert Reece defines colorism as “the process by which people of color—in this case Black Americans—are awarded advantages based on their phenotypical proximity to whiteness” (5). In other words, “Black people who look more stereotypically White—lighter skin, thinner noses, thinner lips, straighter hair, lighter eyes, etc.—tend to be privileged relative to those who look more stereotypically Black—darker skin, thicker noses and lips, tightly coiled hair” (5). As Reece notes, the effects of colorism are evident almost everywhere, in employment, education, and cultural institutions. Colorism is not a new phenomenon nor is it unique to the United States and very much predates the civil war. Furthermore, within the ideology of colorism, Reece notes, mulattos were viewed by white people as a “buffer class, shield from Black people, particularly during the antebellum years” (6). According to Reece, a legislative report investigating a planned slave revolt in the early 1820s confirms this sentiment. It reads,

Free mulattos are a barrier between our own color and that of the black and in cases of insurrection are more likely to enlist themselves under the

banners of the whites. ... Most of them are industrious, sober, hardworking mechanics, who have large families and considerable property; and so far as we are acquainted with their temper and dispositions of their feelings, abhor the idea of association with the blacks in any enterprise. . . (as cited in Jones 1508-1509) (Reece 7)

The play of colorism is most obvious when we look at the stratification system used by the US Census. Reece writes, "Census mailers did not exist until 1960, so, before then, Census enumerators traveled the country completing Census forms for households" (8). Early Census instructions were explicit:

Be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons. The word 'black' should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; 'mulatto,' those persons who have three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; 'quadroon,' those persons who have one-fourth black blood; and 'octoroon,' those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood (as cited in Hickman) (Reece 8).

The preciseness of this stratification reflects the racial taxonomy used in French and Spanish colonies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet there is an obvious question that needs to be asked: by the time one reaches the quadroon and octoroon stages, how do you determine whether the person standing before you is either one of these categories? The answer, you probably can't without a genealogy. Thus Galen's "passing" as a white woman or white man can only be achieved if his skin color is light enough to defy detection.

Julia Thomas observes, "our eyes are not simple recorders or receptacles of information: they do not simply mirror a world that exists unproblematically outside them" (4). In fact, she continues,

world perception involves not just the act of looking but decision-making too: the brain searches for the best possible interpretation of the available data. And this idea of 'interpretation' is of more than passing significance because in order for the brain to transform what is seen into something recognisable, to create meanings through sight, it relies on learnt assumptions about the characteristics of, and differences between, things. Such distinctions, however natural they seem, are not inherent in sight or even in the visualized (4).

Moreover, Thomas argues,

it is more than biology that dictates how one sees. Seeing is bound up in value judgements (one assesses things by their appearance) and, because it is spatially and temporally limited (one cannot see everything simultaneously but only a certain amount and at any one moment), it involves an element of choice (4).

Thomas' point is especially cogent when we consider race and the essentially unstable nature of its predicates in *Indigo*. White passing arises as the cultural and ideological interlocutor of a concept that insists upon sight as the infallible medium of recognition and knowledge. Generally, one person sees another person and, based upon her physical appearance (systemized value judgments), immediately decides how or whether to categorize her (choice). Of course, this system works well if one can be certain that the interpretation of what one is seeing is valid. For example, a man racially designated as 'white' sees a woman whose skin color is dark brown. The man racially categorized 'white' draws upon a received body of cultural and linguistic codes designed to aid his interpretation of what he sees: assumptions about color, physiognomy, culture, status, and hierarchy, as well as a cultural lexicon to name what he is about to interpret. As a result, the man 'sees' the woman as a 'Black' woman, and thus racially different and possibly inferior. Conversely, if the woman 'seen' has 'white' skin, then our 'white' man undergoes the same reasoning process but reaches a different conclusion.

The real epistemological problem, I would argue, is extant in the second scenario. Here, we need to recognize that the 'white' man may be 'reading' the woman's body both correctly and incorrectly; incorrectly in that the woman was born to parents of African ancestry and correctly because her physical appearance marks her as 'white'. If there are no other signs to indicate the woman's lineal 'blackness' the man does not question what he 'sees'. Moreover, should the woman be joined by two 'black' individuals and she acknowledges a kinship or group relation or if through some other means the man discovers his misreading, then he must question not only the relationship between seeing and knowledge, but also the belief system that constitutes the way in which he interprets what he sees. Should the man remain ignorant of the woman's genealogy *and* the woman is aware of his misreading *and* she does not correct his assumption about her racial identity then her action constitutes deliberate white passing.

Jenkins draws attention to this problematic in *Indigo*. Galen's ability to "pass as white" not only raises questions about "Blackness" but also about "Whiteness" as readable somatic truths of colorism. The use of "mulatto-gold" valorizes Galen in two ways, first as a member of the *gens de couleurs libres* and as a wealthy individual. As he explains to Hester later in the novel,

because of my ancestry, impersonating a French Creole from New Orleans was a fairly easy task. Back then I passed myself off as foreign every time I stepped on American soil. It was my way of ridiculing the Black Code restrictions on travel and accommodations. You'd be surprised how many people are impressed when you claim to be a Brazilian ambassador or a crown prince of Portugal (Jenkins 286-287).

There is no question that colorism, with its built-in parameters of class ideologies, becomes a contentious issue in Hester and Galen's relationship.

As Galen pursues his wild courtship of Hester, she repeatedly refuses to marry him despite the fact that they have become lovers. Even his declaration of love fails to sway her. For Hester, her skin color and former enslavement haunts her – her father sold himself into enslavement for love and the evidence of her enslavement is inscribed in her "purple hands." In a powerful moment for both Hester and the romance reader, she says to Galen,

“Look at my hands. Are these the hands you want presiding over your household? Are these the hands you want presented to your friends and family?” (Jenkins 255). To Galen’s single word answer, “Yes,” Hester replies, “I don’t believe you” (255). Hester’s response is uttered “softly” and in that moment the reader fully grasps the intricate gordian knot between race, colorism, and economic class.

Hester’s “I don’t believe you” speaks volumes about the marriage of class and colorism within a Black community. Despite her status as a property owner, Hester recognizes the enormous gulf that exists between Galen Vachon and Hester Wyatt. Throughout the novel, she constantly reminds Galen of that chasm and he, as his “obsession” with and determination to wed Hester grows, continually rejects her arguments. Hester is aware of the implications that marriage to a dark-skinned Black woman, former enslaved, and physically marked by that experience for life, poses for a man of Galen’s background. Thus despite her heart and body, she repeatedly insists that a marriage between them is not happening and he insists that it will.

In her Black Romance Podcast interview, Jenkins declares that “Galen is ... the over the top romance hero with a purpose.” He ticks all of the genre’s traditional boxes — handsome, protective, commanding, and an exemplum of virtue even if Galen is also not above infuriating arrogance and using his wealth to get what he wants — “he nodded like a tall monarch pleased with a royal subject” (Jenkins 64). In scene after scene, we are made witnesses to Galen’s “over the top” demeanor. And yet, it is always done from the heart when it comes to Hester. One telling moment occurs when he pays her a clandestine visit after bailing her from jail. Taking her in his arms he holds her for a period before asking, “Are you still angry with me?” After she chastises him, Galen admits his concern and tells Hester, “when Quint came to me to ask my assistance in freeing you, I didn’t hesitate” (Jenkins 226). Never one to back down, she asks, “But the gold was as bit over the top, don’t you think?” Galen’s response neither surprises the reader, or I suspect Hester: “He looked down into her black-diamond eyes and shrugged. ‘Not really’” (226). Yet, this “over the top” arrogant man who “enjoys impressing” Hester can also declare, as he hugs Hester, “when I entered the sheriff’s office this evening and saw you standing so angrily behind that gun— then I saw tears in your eyes—I think I hate it when you cry.” At Hester’s “questioning look,” Galen says, “I do...It makes me want to destroy whomever or whatever has caused you pain” (226).

Throughout the novel, the reader is entertained and moved by Galen’s actions, and Hester’s reaction. We are also conflicted as we watch Hester’s struggles with the colorism and class differences she believes make her an unworthy partner for Galen Vachon. While there are several cringe moments, the one Black women face far too often—the accusation of being a man’s “whore”— becomes resolved in a familiar romance convention as Galen uses the accusation to achieve his goal to make Hester his wife. Despite the fact she and Galen are lovers, that he has confessed his love for her and she has fallen in love with him, Hester refuses to budge from her class-bound idea that “men like him don’t marry women” like her (Jenkins 262). Not surprisingly, Galen shreds the layers of her refusal to its core:

You’re afraid, Hester. Afraid loving me is going to turn you into a woman who won’t know her own mind .... You’re afraid you’re going to end up like your father, but think how deeply your father must have loved your mother to give over his very existence. He loved her enough not to care that he had no



freedom. Loved her enough to turn his back on the world and all he owned. That took strength, Hester Wyatt, a strength you'll never know, all because you're afraid to trust your heart (Jenkins 263).

Galen then goes on to say, "This is how much I love you, Indigo. By next week this time, you are going to be my wife, whether you care to be or not" (263). Hester's response is classic Black woman strength — "You can't force me to marry you, Galen." To which he responds, "Will you be in church on Sunday?" She nodded. 'Good. So will I.'

The next scene is exquisite Beverly Jenkins romance magic. When Hester arrives at church two days later, she discovers the full extent of the outcome of Foster's threats to humiliate her. With the exception of a few dedicated friends, most of the congregation clearly chose to accept Foster's accusation of an illicit relationship between Hester and Galen as truth. After the pastor delivers a fierce sermon on sin, Galen rises and says,

"Reverend, since we all know for whom this fire and brimstone is intended, why don't you just prepare to conduct a wedding? ...There are rumors that Hester Wyatt is my whore. You are wrong. It is my wife I wish for her to be ...Hester Wyatt is my love...my heart" (Jenkins 265-66).

At this point, the declaration should be enough. Yet, Galen, who does nothing modestly, turns to Hester and begins show her and the world the depths of his love with verses from the *Song of Solomon*. If there is any doubt as to his love for Hester, this moment shatters it: "Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse...thou hast ravished my heart... Until the day break, and the shadows flee away ..." (266). After this extraordinary moment, and after she is married to the man who owns her heart, Hester remains Hester, telling Galen "I'm going to get you for this..."

The relationship between Hester and Galen, not surprisingly, is one of equals. From the moment Galen enters her life, Hester discovers he is both a challenge and an inspiration for her to remain true to herself —characteristics Galen respects and loves in Hester. He loves her because she is one of the many "Black women [who] fought back" against attempts to devalue them as human beings or, as Foster Quint unconsciously seems to do, consider her a throw away object. As Katherine Wyatt's niece and David Wyatt's daughter, Hester works hard to live up to the social and racial expectations of her community. She refuses to be anyone other than who she is: "an ex-slave woman with indigo hands" (Jenkins 254) who fights to free enslaved peoples whose lives once mirrored hers. While I won't rehearse the tempestuous journey Hester and Galen take to achieve their romance happily ever after, it is worth noting that Jenkins never dilutes the couple's journey for the sake of the world they inhabit. In other words, for all that a painful and traumatic history shaped the couple's lives, Jenkins never allows *Indigo's* readers to lose sight of what compels their future: the romance of Black love and its "happily ever after." It is the happily ever after that defangs the historical horrors of the Fugitive Slave Act, and the brutality of the slave owners and their responses to "runaways." As Jenkins observes:

Black people love, you know, we still loved. We still had birthday parties. We still had children. We still celebrated marriages. We still went to church.... Mainstream America ...all they [want] to focus on is the pain. It's like pain

porn...what some of the younger kids call it. And that's not our entire lives... It's not always about the pain. It can be about the love also (Moody-Freeman).

This is the story *Indigo* brings to its readers and to literary fiction. Black romance, especially Black historical romance, does not have to rehearse just the pain. While it is important to acknowledge the political, ideological, social, and economic histories that shaped and continues to affect Black lives in the United States, Black peoples were never the sum total of their enslavement. Jenkins refuses this ideology in her historical romances as she crafts storylines, characters, and happily ever afters that reflect the lived experiences often erased or rendered insignificant to the romance genre.

At one point during the Black Romance Podcast interview, Jenkins was asked, "what does writing romance mean to you"? She replied, "I love what I do because romance gives hope, It gives clarity. It gives second chances." In many ways, this vision is what sets *Indigo* apart. While her meticulous attention to historical details result in a rich and nuanced world, it is Jenkins' eye for the literary heart of her romances (the lovely use of metaphor, constructing a fascinating narrative arc, and ability to redefine generic themes to involve her readers at the deepest levels) that define Hester and Galen's storyline. Readers become keenly aware Jenkins

is doing something very powerful in her historical romances. In a country that still insists on telling history in a way that centers white people, even while condemning things they've done, she writes love stories where African American men and women are the stars, the heroes and heroines of their own narratives (Faircloth).

What is also striking in Jenkins' romances in general and her historical romances in particular is the level of equality that always emerges between her main characters. Reading *Indigo*, I find Galen never disappoints. Even in his early insistence on giving Hester the luxuries his wealth can afford, Jenkins makes clear it is never with the intent to make Hester beholden to him. Rather, as Galen so eloquently states when Hester questions him about the clothing "crammed" in a room, "I told you a long time ago, I wanted to drape you in silks, so –" and, with a signature Galen Vachon move, "he ended with a shrug as if that were explanation enough" (270).

One of the subtle differences in the way Jenkins draws her male heroes is that they are often the first one to accept what is in their hearts. By chapter eight in the novel, both the reader and Galen recognize that his desire for Hester is more than physical. When his aunt Racine asks, "Do you love this innocent?" Galen's response is telling. "Maxi is all but convinced. Me. I'm not certain." (169). Even if Galen is "not certain," his actions suggest otherwise. We see this again in *Forbidden* as Rhine Fontaine accepts that his feelings for Eddy Carmichael trump the logic behind his engagement to Natalie Greer. The difference between the two heroes, in Jenkins' words, is that "... Galen is just, he's like the over the top romance hero with a purpose" (Moody-Freeman). It is difficult to argue with Jenkins' assessment of *Indigo's* hero:

Every character, especially in my older books, represented an aspect of African American history. Galen represents that. He also represents the *gens de couleur* of Louisiana, the rich, wealthy, free Black. They were free, but they couldn't vote, so they weren't that free. So, he represents a lot of different aspects of African American history, but he also represents the ideal oh-my-God romance hero (Moody-Freeman).

To read a Beverly Jenkins' historical romance novel like *Indigo* is to be reminded of the purpose and promise of the romance genre. It is a "promise" to represent a world of familiarity based on expected customs, beliefs, and characterizations. It is a promise to do so in "an elegant style in prose, for the delight and instruction of the reader" (Huet). It is a promise that Jenkins' wielding of romance conventions, especially a happily ever after, will fulfill her readers' expectations and more. Finally, Jenkins' historical romances illuminate the degree to which notions of historical authenticity have elided or erased truths about Black peoples and their lives, especially when it comes to Black love. Like romance authors before her, Jenkins fulfills the millennium-old promise of the genre: while "love is hard work," her main characters will always have a happily ever after.

## Postscript

I made a decision to reject the centrality of whiteness and its "gaze" in my thinking about Jenkins's historical romance canon and Black romance. An earlier version of this essay began with a longish summary of historical romance and the politics of publishing and the romance community at large. The readers for this special *JPRS* issue on Black Romance responded to that version and their comments were incredibly useful and some suggestions are incorporated into this final essay. What those responses also brought to the fore is the sense, either as subtext or explicitly referenced, that discussions on Black historical romance *ought* be contextualized or framed in relation to non-Black (read white) historical romance novels. I own responsibility for this as I began the earlier version from this starting point. While I am grateful to the meticulous *JPRS* readers of this essay, I have, with a couple of exceptions, ignored the reports' recommendations to situate the essay within the normative parameters of academic romance scholarship. I choose not to do so for several reasons. Beverly Jenkins' canon has been available to romance scholars since the late 1990s, and yet with one exception very little critical or literary scholarship has surfaced on her novels. The most significant study can be found in Rita B. Dandridge's *Black Women's Activism: Reading African American Women's Historical Romances* (2004). Greater attention has been paid to the career of Beverly Jenkins and her impact in the romance community than to the content of her novels themselves. What this essay has sought to offer is a thought piece on *Indigo*. While the ideologies of colorism and socio-economic class inform my engagement with *Indigo*, what Jenkins refers to as "pain porn" does not, which brings me to a *JPRS* reader's recommendation to incorporate Catherine M. Roach's brief discussion of *Indigo*, specifically the novel's prologue, into my analysis. I cannot. Catherine Roach astutely points out, "romantic fiction portrays true love as both binding and freeing, and ultimately, as freeing because it is binding" (128). Yet Roach's engagement with *Indigo*

centers on the novel's epistolary prologue. The "love" story of David and Frances is not the romantic narrative of *Indigo*; it is merely backstory. The discussion, a thoughtful reading of bell hooks' *All About Love* and the prologue, centers the backstory of Hester Wyatt's parents, briefly told in a pair of letters, and not the actual romance at the heart of *Indigo*. It is Hester and Galen who are the "Black people [who love]" and who prove that while Black lives may be affected by the constraints of a white supremacist political economy, Black love is as "authentic" as its non-Black counterparts. Beverly Jenkins chose to center Black romance, Black love, and African American culture in her historical romances, I honor that choice by centering a Black gaze.

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