

Conversation with Alyssa Cole

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Julie Moody-Freeman: *I am so happy to have Alyssa Cole with me. Welcome.*

Alyssa Cole: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

JMF: *So I want to go all the way back to the beginning. I want to talk about when you first started reading romance. I have my story. What's your story?*

AC: And so part of my story is, like, you know, what your parents tell you from the time before you can really remember. And you don't know if it's, like, true or it's, like, you know, that the mom is embellishing. For as long as I can remember, I have always loved reading. I guess I've always loved stories when I learned how to read. My parents would read to me. My other family members who live with us or who visited us or we visited would read with me. I loved watching movies with romantic things. I mean, even when I was, like, two. And this is my mom's story, which is that I have been a writer since before I could write. She said I used to have a journal that I would have to write in that was drawing pictures and write random things before I went to bed every night. Unfortunately, it got lost. We moved several times, and they got lost in the move, but she's always talking about how she is sad that she wasn't able to preserve my earliest writing. I always have kind of loved stories and storytelling and stories with romantic elements. But my first romances – I started reading my parents' books pretty early. You know I was learning to read in kindergarten and I have a sister who is three years younger than me. And when I was learning to read, she was two. And then she starts learning to read. She actually started a bit before me, and I was like, 'Oh no, I have to step it up'. Five-year-old me like 'what's happening?'. I started reading... but once I started reading... it was like, okay, I would have children's books. I would just take whatever I could find from my parents' library... dictionaries... books that were well beyond what I should be reading.

My first book wasn't specifically romance. It was actually horror. So the first adult book that I remember reading is Stephen King's *The Shining*, and I was seven when I started reading it, and I got so scared at the part when Danny was going into room 237. At that time I was sharing a room with my older sister, and I ran to my older sister's part of the room, and I hid the book under the bed. If you think that hiding a book will stop a monster from coming out of the book, you probably are too young to be reading that book. So I didn't finish that until I was an adult. I read other Stephen King stuff, but that was always super scary to me, but I also at that time started reading Anne Rice and Jackie Collins, you know, basically everything I could. All of the genre stuff my parents had in their library. And I also was watching TV shows. So the thing is that, for me, I didn't really understand that romance was a genre until, like, much later in life. I will just be like, 'I want a book where people fall in love'. Like, I didn't really understand, you know, genre stuff. And as you can see from my writing, I kind of still don't understand. I'm just like, 'I'm going to spend the right stuff'. The first ones that I really remember, the first one that I feel like I remember its impact on me and I still have a copy – I had to buy a new copy – it was actually a middle-grade romance, which I'm not sure if those still exist. It was called *Ann of the Wild Rose Inn* by Jennifer Armstrong. It's a book for young readers. It takes place during the Revolutionary War in America. So you see these things that kind of imprint you as a child. And kind of stay with you, and it was like the first time I felt this really strong, because it's, like, explicitly a romance structure, even though it's a book for young readers. And I first read that when I was nine. It was in my teacher Miss Peskin. She had her book closet that we could borrow books from, and I borrowed it and never brought it back, and she just didn't say anything because she was cool.

And it was, like, the first time that I had read things with romance, because, you know, I read things with romantic elements that I enjoyed before, but it was the first time that I feel like that structure really laid itself down on me. I guess that I understood I was reading, and I felt the power of that. These people meeting have this conflict. Things look

like they won't work out. And then they do, and how amazing it feels when they do. So I feel like that book for me was, in a way, life-changing. The second life-changing book for me was, well, actually, there was around the same time or slightly before that. So we would always go to – I grew up in Jersey City – and we would always go hang out in the village South Street Seaport on the weekend, and we would go to The Strand bookstore. And my parents would let us pick out one book or whatever. And a couple of the books that my mom had picked up for us were these fairy tales. They were fairy tale illustrated books, but all the characters were Black. So it's Cinderella, but Black, Sleeping Beauty – and, like, you know, it didn't say but Black – but the point of you reading it. And so it's, you know, again, one of those things that imprinted on me. Here I was, as a kid I had all of these books in the series that showed people who look like me and my family as princesses and these fairy tales that I already love so much. And then nowhere else did I see that. I didn't see that anywhere else, maybe until like Brandy. Brandy [in] *Cinderella*. And I think that also always stuck with me. I mean, even as a kid, I was always like, 'why is it so hard to find stories that I enjoy with people that look like me and look like my family and look like my friends?' and so in those books, I found out as an adult. When I went to look them up. I believe the author is Fred Crump Jr. I'm not sure about his name, but he actually was a white man who was an art teacher at a school with the majority of Blacks, a student body, and he wanted his students to be able to see themselves in fairy tales. So it's one of those things where you think about diversity and books and the kind of impact that can have on young readers. Now I'm writing princess books because I was able to see myself in these books.

JMF: *It's like those two series were beginning to be developed, right? Your Loyal League series and then now you have your fairy tale in the Reluctant Royals series. Amazing!*

AC: I would say the other most influential book – it was actually the first romance that I bought for myself, I believe I was eleven. I was at Waldenbooks which was my hangout. And it was Sandra Kitt's *The Color of Love*. So for me that was amazing in so many ways because at that point, I also thought I wanted to be an illustrator. So I thought I would be a comic artist or an illustrator. So here's this book that is a romance, and I love romance, and then I look at the back, and it's about a Black woman who's an illustrator, and then I look at the inside and it's by a Black woman. So it was, like, all of these things, and being like, you know, 'wow, it's you'. Here is this book that is showing me all of the things I want to be that I never really see presented of something I can be and, you know, apart from being a romance, just what the book represented for me. So, when I got to meet Sandra Kitt, as an adult romance writer, I lost my cool. So that [meeting] was extremely important to me. And also I'm forgetting the author's name – this was around the same period because Waldenbooks was the hook up – for a lot of other books like *Annie on my Mind* by Nancy Garden, which is YA lesbian romance. Which at the time I was obsessed with the book. And I was like, 'I mean, I know it's weird because I'm straight. But I really love this book.' I mean, I didn't think about it that clearly at the time. But then, in retrospect, I was like, 'ohhh no wonder I loved that book'. Even if you are straight, it's a good book. But it also again was a formative book, seeing yourself in a book, even if you weren't sure that was yourself. I feel like, you know, and this is the thing too, is we need diverse books and things like that. I think I love those initiatives, but I do think that there have been books that we kind of overlook. We always need more, many more exponentially more, but I do really feel lucky

that I was able to find these books as a kid when I needed them and have them impact me and help me to kind of incubate the ideas that have helped me create the stories that I create now.

JMF: *Yeah, I'm definitely seeing the tie. Can we talk a little about how you got your first romance, the novella or the novel published? I think Let It Shine [was] the first one, or did you do something [else]?*

AC: So actually, I believe the first short story that was published was "Sweet to the Taste," which is Wild Rose Press. I think maybe the first one. It came out shortly after *Eagle's Heart* which is my first book that was published [and] is currently not in print. Because the publisher shut down a couple of years ago. I have the rights reverted, but I haven't had time to, you know, edit it and go through and republish it. It [*Eagle's Heart*] was about a woman, a Brooklyn school teacher who has a close relationship with one of her students. It was [a] romantic suspense. And it was a bit. It was darker. I mean, I won't say it's darker than other things I write, but it's romantic suspense. Her student goes missing. And then she gets involved with [the] Albanian mafia. The hero is an FBI agent or some kind of agent who is also Albanian and is working to bring down this Albanian gang leader who used to be his friend. And he kind of is undercover and then, like, they're trying to figure out his connection to this girl. They fall into love or whatever. And so, yeah, it was a romantic suspense mafia romantic suspense.

JMF: *And who was the publisher?*

AC: The publisher was Lucid.

JMF: *Oh!*

AC: Yeah, which was a digital press. [It] got published and that was when they started – it was around the time of Lucid, Ellora's Cave, [and] Samhain which were opening up. They produced eBooks, and they were opening up the ability for diversity in publishing because they were able to acquire books from a wider variety of authors.

JMF: *Wow! Amazing history! So then you have Eagle's Heart and then "Sweet to the Taste"?*

AC: Yes. It ["Sweet to the Taste"] was another short story. It's just about a woman who is at her South Asian friend's wedding and meets a demigod – an Indian demigod – while hanging out in the greenhouse. And they have a little tryst and... at the end of the story, she meets some other guy and we can presume that they will have something going on because she didn't really want to become, like, a demigod's girlfriend.

JMF: *Is it in print?*

AC: No, it's a short story, but it's in – you can get the eBook still, I think.

JMF: *Okay.*

AC: But I think that was the first thing that was ever published, and then I think *Eagle's Heart* came out after it. That was 2014 when they came out. And then 2015 was when *Off the Grid* came out. But also 2014 was also the year when *For Love and Liberty* came out, which was an anthology that I put together with Lena Hart, Stacy Agdern, and Kate McMurray. The impetus for that was that I was doing a romance book club at Jefferson Market Library in Manhattan, and I used to do theme book clubs, like, trying to find books for similar themes. For Fourth of July, I was trying to find Revolutionary War romance, and it was not really easy to find that in the library catalog. Everything we found was, like, white people, so it was kind of like it would be great to be able to find a Revolutionary War romance. And so from that came the idea to make an anthology. That was the first anthology I did. And then in the years after that I did anthologies with Lena Hart again, two more anthologies with Lena Hart. On those anthologies the coauthors were Piper Huguley and Kianna Alexander. After that I did another anthology with Rose Lerner and Courtney Milan, so anthologies have been for me, like, a great way to write short historical romance novellas. Kind of a burst of diversifying the time period that we're writing about and a way to tell more stories without having to write full novels. I mean, I love novellas. I love reading novellas. I don't think that every book has to be 80,000 or 100,000 words. Sometimes I just want to read something that will take an hour, two hours and have the full story. But I also – for me, it's also practicality. I have a lot of ideas, and I would never have enough time to write them all as full length books. But I do think, apart from that, I had some stories work really well as novellas and also it's just fun. I have fun writing novels and reading them.

JMF: Right. I think one of those – the second one – maybe that you did is with Piper Huguley?

AC: Yeah, and that's right, that's right. *Let It Shine*. The inspiration for that was at the time I had been reading – I was a big fan of Ta-Nehisi Coates' blog and read it every day. I was in the Horde unit. I didn't comment. I was mostly a lurker. I commented, sometimes, but I did join the group and become friends with many of the commenters. So he would post every day, and he would post, you know, whatever historical thing he had read. I mean, he posted about all kinds of things. I found it because he had posted something about comic books, and I was like, 'oh you know this guy is talking about comic books', and then I went and just started reading all the posts and really enjoyed his writing. And then especially about American history, it really hit this nerve for me because at this point, I had started to read more historical romance, and again, it was that same sensation from when I was a kid of, like, well, you know. I had just discovered Beverly Jenkins. At this point, I hadn't read much yet because I had just discovered her backlist and her body of work and her contribution. And I was just like, you know, there's so many stories to be told. Like, it's such fertile ground for romance. And I was like, you know, for me, I kind of just like learning things and then putting it into my romances. That's basically like my MO – like, what do I want to learn, like being a teacher without having to have interaction. But so I get interested in something and then I say, inevitably, it's like, but what romance would come out of this situation? There was a book that came out [and] all of the mug shots had been released from the 1961 Freedom Ride. I don't know if it was the Freedom of Information Act or a certain time period passed, but all the mug shots were released, and the photographer wrote a book where he had the mug shots, but he also found people after, you know, all

these years after, and interviewed many of them about their experiences and photographed them all of these years later. And, you know, seeing the mug shots and just thinking about what they went through, the story started forming. The book is called *Breach of Peace* and it's by Eric Etheridge. And so, you know, at first I just saw the mug shots, and when I saw the mug shots on Coates' blog, he started talking about them. And then the story started building in my head. And then I got the book. And as I was reading the book. I was like, 'okay, it's not based on anyone in the book', but, like, going through the mug shots and seeing some of the stories, it was like, okay, these situations actually match up with what I had envisioned for the story. The heroine is Black, and the hero is [a] Jewish boxer. They both joined this nonviolent protest student group. And it turns out they were childhood friends who had been separated by a situation, a tragedy that happened when they were children.

I was writing it [during] a period when protests were starting to happen again in the US, you know, not when I started the concept, but Ferguson and things like that were going on as I was editing. Unfortunately, I feel like I have this thing where sometimes I'm like, 'why did the things I'm writing about keep happening?' but it's also, I just feel like, kind of like the things that I'm paying attention to are things that are cyclical in the US and happen again and again, which is why it feels prescient at times, but it's actually just the way things are, unfortunately.

JMF: *Right. Yes. So since we're talking about the historical, particularly the one I want to talk about is An Unconditional Freedom. I've always tried to avoid when I picked my novels to read, I avoided certain time periods. And the time periods I avoid have especially to do with the 1800s, so when I picked up this book and read it, it was just amazing to me because we're sort of in the midst of this, but then you have 'the meanwhile' (coined by Ruthie Gilmore in a talk at DePaul). So meanwhile people are living and loving. So how did you come up with this particular one? What were your reasons for writing?*

AC: So *An Unconditional Freedom*, that's the third book in the Loyal League series, and with that series I was kind of trying to feature different aspects of the war, things that aren't often discussed, but that are historically interesting. The first book the heroine is based on Mary Bowser who is a free Black woman with a photographic memory. In reality, she went to spy in Jefferson Davis's White House and would send messages about what was going on and what we're supplying and things like that.

JMF: *And so you are talking about An Extraordinary Union.*

AC: Yeah. The second book is set in North Carolina, and it is about the resistance, the Southern resistance to the Civil War and the fact that not everyone was down with it. And one of the reasons – one of many reasons – for the fall of the Confederacy was that it was a myth. Everyone didn't want to be part of that, for various reasons, not just because they were against, you know, slavery. Lots of people had different reasons for not wanting to support it. And it weakened them from within. But then in the aftermath of the Civil War we have this idea that, you know, the South was united and, like, the lost cause revisionist history. I kind of wanted to focus on the fact that people of color and Black people were fighting back. All kinds of people were fighting back. Quakers were resisting, different

religious groups, poor people were resisting because they were just like, 'Why do I have to buy it while you know this rich guy who is the one who actually owns slaves doesn't have to buy into it?'. I kind of just wanted to take a look at that aspect plus romance. And also *An Unconditional Freedom* was a very difficult book to write.

JMF: *Oh, it was a difficult book for me to read.*

AC: I often refer to it as the book that almost killed me. I don't mean it quite literally, but it was very difficult because I was also writing it in the wake of Trump, the country kind of seeming to go back to this situation. And so for me, I'm like, 'I have to write a happy ending for this book, for this hero'. In the present day where I know that things are bad again. I feel like a lot of my despair went into that book. I think it's a good book, but I will, you know, definitely agree that it's a hard book to read. And I think that's because it was a hard book to write, but I also think I tried at least for the ending to be as uplifting as the low points in the book were low. But for me, it's very much felt kind of like a journey through the darkest parts of American history. And the realization that it can happen again. But all you can do is keep fighting.

JMF: *I thought this was a brilliantly written book. I picked up the book to read. I put it down. It took me a long time. Usually I'll read it in a matter of hours or a day or so. And I have to say that it took much longer like a month or so and part of why I say it's brilliant is because it made me learn a lot of things about myself and what I expect from a hero. So I am definitely a reader that prefers the alpha hero, and in a way Daniel is sort of that because he is an agent. Right? We know that he is sort of cold, nobody wants to bother him because he locks them out, but he is really suffering from what could be like PTSD.*

AC: Yeah, PTSD.

JMF: *Right. Because he was snatched and sold. He was free, snatched, and sold. And so, I think I didn't want to face that. I didn't want to. I wanted my hero to conquer everything, and you refused to let that hero do that and for us to come to understand him. That was what I thought was brilliant. It made me learn. It exposed a lot in me. So it's very fascinating to hear that you too struggled with how to write this hero.*

AC: Yeah. And with Daniel too I had to go back [and rewrite]. I mean, I know it probably doesn't seem like it. Some of it was so dark. But I also was in a way try[ing]. I mean, you know, I was in a dark place. But I also was trying to, in a way, have the book be a journey from darkness into light. And also to me I didn't want it to be trauma porn. I didn't want it to be like, 'oh look at what this Black man has gone through because of slavery', but at the same time I wanted it to be like, 'look at what this man has gone through'. For me that's the wildest part is that it's not even as bad it's – not to have a scale of suffering – but, like, in all of the things I researched and all the things I cut out that could have gone in the book, it's not anywhere near as bad as it could have been. And it's still horrible. So, like, I feel like, yeah, there was just this kind of trying to balance, but also being mad that I even had to make that balance because like it could have gone much, much darker. But, I mean, I didn't, but the fact that was a choice that I had to make. I'm not going to show all of these terrible

things, and I am only going to show a fraction of these terrible things, and it's still overwhelming as a writer and as a reader. So that the journey with Daniel was difficult to become, and I feel like this is something you know when you're writing characters with PTSD. And I feel like I have a few of them, which is that, like, you know, sometimes, like you said, in our books, we just want the characters to overcome. But overcoming things, first of all, it's not that simple. But also how each character overcomes will be different depending on the character, like, how it's different, depending on the person. And, like, in real life. And also, you know, there are different levels of that, of what you will see in the book and perhaps what they will achieve later down the line. But yeah, for me, it was interesting for me, too, because it was hard, but it was also cathartic in a way, because getting to explore these parts of myself as well. And the kind of rage of not being able to change the world.

JMF: *Right, right.*

AC: You know, sometimes, you know, especially I feel like as a Black woman seeing all the things going on and being like, 'why can I not just fix this?'. And then even trying to fix it and failing, like for Daniel, there's kind of this idea of coming. You were talking about coming to terms with some things within yourself and for Daniel, and for people in real life in many other ways you have coming to terms with the fact that there are limits to your own power even when you're doing the right thing and even when you're on the right side. So I got very frustrated too, because I couldn't – spoiler [alert] – but in the book he's decided to assassinate Jefferson Davis and also [when] the book came out, I was like, 'I hope this doesn't get me put on some kind of watchlist'. But, you know, kind of the frustration, as I was like, 'why did I choose this?' because Jefferson Davis didn't die in real life. I couldn't do some of the end, even if I wanted to, I couldn't just have Daniel – kill him, spoiler alert – because that would take it a whole other [direction] that would then be alternate history, fantasy.

JMF: *How did Daniel come to you?*

AC: So he appears in the first two, and in the first book he was mentioned.

JMF: *Yes, he was Elle's...*

AC: Yes! He was Elle's childhood friend who was in love with her and thought that they would eventually get married but didn't really understand her and what she needed. I also wanted to explore that too, to show their friendship and how they change over the years and how, you know, they can come to be friends again, hopefully, which in romance 'childhood friends to lovers' is a common trope. Yes, I wanted to explore a little bit what happens when it's one-sided, and the other person doesn't ever reciprocate it, and, you know, when the person kind of gets better about that. But Daniel came to me because I think I wanted to examine Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave*. I feel like not much is written, or I had not seen much about what happened to him after he returned home. I was just thinking about when something really traumatic happens, can you really go home? What would life have been like for him, even if he was ecstatic to see his family and friends? But he wasn't the same person when he went back, and so many people who experienced

trauma, whether that be through war or, you know, whatever, an accident or whatever experience, they kind of are left alone to deal with these feelings. It's because other people don't know how to relate to them anymore. In a way, it's kind of homage to Solomon Northrup because I feel like people talk about him a lot. But I don't feel like I had ever seen anything about the emotional impact, the emotional fallout afterward. I tried to examine several different emotional responses that people had to their situations. Janeta, the heroine of that book, who is Cuban, her mother was an African woman who was enslaved was owned by her [Janeta's] father and who then became free by marrying her father. Janeta has to go through this journey of thinking about what she has been told about herself in comparison to other Black people. So she has her own journey of self-discovery. The people that they travel with who each have their own inner lives and emotions and stories. And for me, I felt like it was important even for secondary characters to try to really show that they have their own entire life, even if I'm not able to show it in the story. I feel like one of the things I hate, particularly in history, if there was a slave, and he did this, and he accepts the change, we can see it today. There's just this kind of refusal to see the emotional interior life of Black people and particularly when it comes to depicting slaves. So there's pain. Yes, but there's also love. There's also brotherly love, their friendships, there's playing with children. I can't obviously do everything in the book. I write what I want to write. I feel like, particularly with this book, I was trying to end with this series because the Civil War literature has become so flattened. I don't ever want to hear about *Gone with the Wind*. You know I don't care about that book. But that's all people want to talk about when they talk about the Civil War, and they never examine how easily they talked about how wonderful Scarlett O'Hara was. And sometimes people will be, like, how Scarlett O'Hara was such a badass. And I'm like, 'Oh really. You are telling me that.' Scarlett O'Hara would have been like fighting to own. Most people don't think. They really don't think because the discourse has been so flattened and so one of the things I do is try to explore interiority or the fact that everyone was going through some things that are not just background props for a story.

JMF: *Yes, yes, I wanted to talk about the Reluctant Royals Series. But before I do that, let's maybe circle back a little to you know writing and publishing and in terms of this historical series your relationship with the editor and the publisher. Right. So how did that come to be published? Did they request it from you or invite you?*

AC: You know, I was just writing things. I submitted for the first book for *Eagle's Heart*. I submitted it. I had met the person in charge at Lucid at an event, and I talked to her for a few moments and described the book to her, and she's like, 'Oh, you should submit that,' and it was accepted by them from a different editor. For the short [story] "Sweet to the Taste," I submitted it through their website. *Let It Shine* is self-published. *Be Not Afraid* self-published. And with *An Extraordinary Union*, when I wrote it, I really thought no one was going to publish it.

JMF: *So you wrote it before you even sent it in?*

AC: I wrote it because I had the idea, and the idea wouldn't leave me alone. And at this point it was already hard enough being a Black woman trying to get published. And then I

was like, 'let me write Civil War romance', which like you said, people are like, 'no thanks'. I'm writing interracial civil war romance, and it's just like, I actually wrote the first draft for National Novel Writing Month. I was going to write a short. I was sure I was going to write a novella and then the story needed to be longer. And I said, 'Okay, I'm just gonna write this for National Novel Writing Month, get out of my system, and that way when it doesn't get published, I won't feel like I took up so much of my time on this project that will probably go nowhere'. When it was done, I felt like it was good. And so for me a lot of my stories I write for myself, like. And that doesn't mean that I don't write them for other people, but I feel like I can pick up one of my books and read it because, first of all, I don't really remember. When enough time has passed. I'm like, 'okay, good'. But I mean, even when I was a kid, I would write stories for myself because I was writing stories that I didn't see in the store or in the library. And I'd be like, 'Okay, what do I want to read about? This princess saving this prince? All right. I'm gonna write it.' And I feel like even now as I'm writing it, I'm like, 'this is garbage. I hate it.' But when it's done, usually I'm like, 'okay, I can read this'. Because, in a way, I know it's not true for every writer, but I can say for myself, I do write stories that I need to read and that hopefully other people need to read or that they will, you know, make them feel good. So yeah, when I finished, and I was reading the first draft. I was like, 'Oh, this actually might be something', so I started submitting it to agents, and then I got an agent after many rejections. It went on submission and eventually was picked up by Kensington by Esi Sogah, who is a Black woman. They were behind me 100%, and with that project I really basically hit the publishing lottery. And my editor was Black. My PR person was Black, and the cover designers was Black. This is not to, like, fault or say that anyone else I've worked with who hasn't been who wasn't Black, you know, whatever. But specifically, knowing the demographics of publishing like that was like lightning striking. So for me it was a great experience when I saw the cover, how striking it was, and especially I feel like the three coverage for that series I really got lucky. It was acquired in early 2016... or was it 2015? I've lost track of time. It was published in 2017 but there was a good amount of time between the book being acquired because I wrote it in the first draft in 2013. So then it went through various drafts, and in 2014, getting an agent, then finding a publisher and then all of the publishing stuff. Between first draft and publishing [it] was many years. Three years at least. Yeah, I'm bad at math, but, um, yeah. So that was for me a very lucky experience, and this is something I can only speak for myself and my experience with my publishers. But I have never had a publisher tell me 'this is what you need to write' or 'you can't write this'. I've been very lucky with my editors. So just to talk about the publishing aspect for a second, with Kensington, I was with Esi Sogah for the three Loyal League books. Avon and William Morrow, Erica Tsang is my editor there. She is Asian, and we have worked together on the *Reluctant Royals*, [and] on my thriller that's coming out, *When No One is Watching*. And now we're working on the *Runaway Royals*, which is the spin off to *Reluctant Royals*. I think about this a lot because I'll go on Twitter, and I'll see people being like, 'Oh, and yeah, you know, at the traditional publishing houses, they make you do this or they make you do that.' I have never ever been asked to write to a certain trope or to take anything about race out. I mean, of course I get as editorial things like, 'do you really need this part about like cells?' or something. But, like, the editorial stuff is generally - it's never them telling me what to do or making demands. And again, I can only speak for myself. I don't know what other editors are like, but I always find that really strange when I see people think the editors are, like, making writers write

things. That may be that in other genres, or maybe other publishing houses, or maybe I just got lucky with my editors, but that's not anything that's ever happened to me. And they really, honestly, let me write what I want, within reason. We'll go back and forth on ideas and if it's a little out there, they'll be like, 'Okay, well, you know, what about this?' But not like, 'Oh no you can't write that because it's too polarizing', or 'you can't write that because we don't want to talk about race', or 'hey, can you add more race?'. They do not talk. I can't even imagine them suggesting that, and I think some editors may be doing it, then, in this age of, like, supposedly diverse books. Maybe some editors are like 'hey, why don't you add this or add that' to people, but I don't really. I don't know. It's a weird thing. I can't. I feel like sometimes perceptions of how much input editors have, it's kind of like from watching old movies, where the editor would be by your side and sitting next to you and being like, 'what about this or that' and then you give each other a high five. They're busy. They don't have time to monitor every author and be like, 'Why don't you write a book about this.' The editors I've worked with have a very clear line between editorial suggestion and trying to tell you what to write. I know that probably is not true for everyone, but for me, I've had a pretty good relationships with my editors and even at Audible, I worked with Rose Hilliard, and it was the same thing. Kind of, you know, suggestions, but not any like no boundaries stepping.

JMF: *Right. So let's talk about the Reluctant Royals series. How did the series come about? And then I kind of want to hone in and talk about A Duke by Default because that's the one I teach in my class. So how did it [the series] come about?*

AC: So the series came about. Well, as we discussed earlier, probably deep within was the princess theme. You know it's funny, actually, I was looking at someone who had a couple of years ago posted they were reading *Let It Shine*. There's a scene where Ivan and Sophie are playing when they're kids, and Ivan says that he will protect her because she is a princess. And then she says 'Black girls can't be princesses.' I mean, it's something to that effect. It's funny when you see that the idea is already there germinating. And it wasn't long after *Let It Shine*. Until very recently I was a production editor at a science journal. I was a copy editor and then a production editor. I was, you know, reading science all day long. Reading science research articles. I love science. I mean, even though I didn't love reading research articles all the time. But, so, you know, I was working in science. And actually, it came about because [I] was at work and kind of surrounded by science all the time. Being one of the few Black women at my job. The Nigerian scammer trends and also just scams in general because I was getting spam mail all the time from Russia like, 'we have this thing of yours, and if you contact us, we will give [it to] you.' I think I kind of all mashed together. I just got the idea for this, and also, I definitely loved *Coming to America* as a child and had a crush on Eddie Murphy, who is problematic but still cute even now. Well [the book dealt] with the idea of what if you got one of these spam mail, and it was true? And it was basically as simple as that. I just had the idea, you know, of a modern day Cinderella working all of these jobs. I always have had periods where I've been working three or four jobs at a time. What I was trying to get across is, like, in a way she has been saved from having to work all these jobs, but at the same time, she's not the kind of person that will stop working. Oh, she'll just work more on her main job but, like, kind of having the security to be able to work on what she loves. The fantasy of the person who feels alone,

who then discovers they have this whole other – apart from having like a fiancé she never knew about – but also like a whole kingdom and whole people. And, in a way, it's funny because when I saw *Black Panther*, I mean, it's crazy I started writing a *Princess in Theory* in, like, 2014.

JMF: *You were already building Wakanda.*

AC: When I saw *Black Panther* and Killmonger, and I was like, Killmonger is an Alekh analogy because he just wanted the same thing. He also was just someone who was alone, and he went around about it the wrong way. But it's – in a way, if you look at it from a certain angle, it's the same story. This person whose parents from this kingdom went to America, they were orphans but their means of discovering their background had different outcomes. Oh, and I was watching *Black Panther*. It was, like, 'oh my gosh this is kind an African American, particularly, fantasy probably of returning to Africa [and] being welcomed'. So I think that's probably part of the similarity and overlap. To me that is what struck me about it. We even see that now in recent years – Ghana had a year of return where they were inviting African American people to come visit and to welcome them back.

JMF: *So yeah, so Portia showed up in that story?*

AC: Yes.

JMF: *That is the one that I teach in my class.*

AC: The Portia and Naledi relationship for me, I wanted them to have a strong relationship, but I also wanted to show that friendships can have problems just like romantic relationships can, and they also need to be addressed or they can be problems that fester in friendships, just like they can in romantic relationships. Because sometimes, you know, when you see a movie or you read a book and, like, it's, like, best friends, blah, blah. I love those too, but also sometimes I want to see how they are working at maintaining their friendship. And what happens when there's a bump in the road in that friendship? And I feel that that shows the character's story as much as a romantic relationship is to me. How do they maintain their friendship? You know that I think most people experience and kind of the fantasy of, okay, there's a problem in a friendship and you can solve it. And you can find a resolution to it. Portia in *A Princess in Theory* is not particularly me, but in *A Duke by Default* I feel like I ended up putting a lot of myself, some of my fears. For years I had this, like, idea of writing a book about a person who is a fuck up, and not clumsy not ditzzy, not, like, you know, rom-com fuck up, but someone who really messes up all the time. Because I felt like I was that kind of person. And so as I was writing it, I also started to learn about ADHD. And the funny thing is that in the first draft Portia did not have ADHD. I mean, she had all of those behaviors. She did not have ADHD. And this is something that actually happens to me often which is sometimes why my initial readers will point out that I seem to be tap dancing around something, and that is usually something that I may have emotional sensitivity about. So in the first draft my reader Corey, who writes [as] Xan West, was one of the initial readers, and they were like, 'so Portia seems to have ADHD'. Yeah, I guess she kind of does. So then in the second draft, I really kind of dug into that and kind of

the feeling, and, like, honestly, it's one of my most popular books that people constantly tell me, like, 'wow, like I see myself so much in this, and I thought I was the only person like this'. I mean, this is amazing feedback, but also to me until the book came out, I was like, 'everyone is going to hate Portia'. And for me, it was just, like, there have been countless people who felt the exact same way, who all thought they were the only person who was like this. So yeah, I mean, people have been diagnosed with ADHD from their doctor and then started medication. Or whatever route they were going to use to manage their ADHD. And so for me, that was, like, really a life-changing experience for me. When I was done with the book, I was happy with it. It was very shocking to see how many readers and how many women in particular who were women and were kind of made to feel all of their lives that they were wrong in some way or that they were constantly messing up, and we all just had ADHD.

JMF: *I teach that book in my class and for presentation that's exactly what they hone in on, and the presentation is about that and they pull readers' comments. And they are moved by that. I'd say for myself, I have a tendency, and I didn't know it until I really took writing about Black romance seriously. I keep being drawn to these books where the love story is set in a center or an institute in a community that's disenfranchised in some way, and Tavish he does sword making, of course, but he also has the center for, I think it's, like, children of immigrants.*

AC: Yeah the people in the neighborhood.

JMF: *Yes. How did that come about? Because you're not the only writer that sets her books in centers. So Gwyneth Bolton [does]. I see Sandra Kitt doing it with the HIV/AIDS center in her book all the way back.*

AC: I know Pamela Sanderson has a series set in a Native American community center. I forget the series name, but that's a more recent one. For me that came about because I kind of wanted to reclaim the duke, but the idea of duke and romance is a very particular kind of idea. And you know I was writing this royalty series and you know everyone else is a prince or a king or a queen, you'll notice, but I was like, 'I'm going to have a duke'. I've met a few people in my life who were biracial and basically completely white passing. And, you know, sometimes when I've met them, we've been in situations where I was the only Black person, and they were, like, so happy to see me and, like, you know, talking to them and then hearing their experiences. The idea of looking like the people who hate you and hate your family. I didn't explore it very deeply in the book because there was a lot going on and also with Tavish, the way he reacts to that is by trying to create a safe space for people who look like him, who look like his family, and a place that he knows from his experience is not entirely safe for them because when people think he's white, they say whatever to him. Like, you know, this isn't explored deeply in the book. In the book it's directly said, like, you know. He is like, 'this is literally not the worst problem that anyone can have', but, um, so I kind of, so it was a play on the duke but also the play on the biracial historical view. Kind of how that trope [of the duke] gets used but never really addresses the issue of racism. It's kind of just there for seasoning and not to have an impact on the book other than to exoticize. So I know, like, in this book, I mean, I didn't fully think it out. But as I'm thinking

about it, like right now, generally when you have a biracial duke in a book, they are like, 'Ooh, look at this. He's not like other dukes' and blah, blah, blah. And in this book he's, like, the whitest person. He's not exoticized, and he is kind of using his privilege to help his community how he can while still trying to do what he wants. He is living his life and using that thing that he loves to improve the lives of the people around him. And, you know, he's grumpy and he is not particularly going to be talking about his feelings or helping his community in that way. But I think with the community center setting, for me it was a way to show what his ideals were: how he relates to his community, what makes them a person that she would want to be with, but also what makes him a hero? It's not that he's a duke. He doesn't even want to be a duke. It's what he does in his community and with his family. So that's kind of why I added that part in the book.

JMF: *Thank you. Thanks for sharing that. So my last question has to do with what's coming out? What are you writing about?*

AC: So I have a few things coming out. The next release today, actually, as we're recording was the release of my eBook for my Audible original on *The AI Who Loved Me*, which is sci-fi, rom-com, thriller-ish. And it's about a woman who is kind of living this life at her apartment complex. It's near future. Her neighbor's nephew arrives, and she ends up having to help him with some things, and she discovers that he is not human. He is a robot. But there is a lot of other stuff going on. I don't want to spoil anything. There is also a cat. She also has her friend living in the apartment complex. After that, coming out September fifteenth, I have my first thriller *When No One is Watching*, which, in a way, is kind of the result of all of my historicals. It's about a contemporary woman who lives in a neighborhood in Brooklyn that has been quickly gentrified, and she decides to, you know, people are doing historical tours in the neighborhood and all that, and she decides to start researching as an escape from her own problems, in a way, she decides to make her own historical tour. She gets unwanted help from one of her neighbors, and as they are researching, she starts to see these things that seem cyclical in nature. Basically, it's a thriller with romance about the cyclical nature of white supremacy. But, you know, it's psychological because with everything going on right now, it feels honestly overwhelming thinking about it, but it's basically about how for much of the book, she doesn't know how disorienting racism and capitalism and white supremacy are. Just how overwhelming the history can be when you're going through all the history and in a way, this book is like a companion book to *An Unconditional Freedom* in a weird way. As far as, like, catharsis and trying to work through some of those. I don't think it's as dark. I mean, it's a thriller, it gets dark in some places. But I feel like as I was writing it for me, it felt a bit like a companion or a way of dealing with some of the unresolved things I had been thinking about when I was writing *An Unconditional Freedom*. Then in December the first *Runaway Royals* book comes out, which is *How to Catch a Queen* and that is if you read *A Prince on Paper*, these characters show up in that book, Sanyu and Shanti. Shanti was actually [in] *A Princess in Theory*. At the end of *A Princess in Theory*, if you haven't read it, spoiler alert, but she's the woman whose shoes get thrown up on at the end. So basically, this book, you know, I finished this and I – actually, again, it was one of those books that when I re-read it, I was like, 'oh, this is actually good'. I mean, enjoyable to me. But it's about they have an arranged marriage, marriage of convenience. In the beginning of the book basically his father, the

king, who has been king for about fifty years of this small, isolated African nation passes away. Right before it happens, Sanyu has spent his entire life being told that he must be strong before becoming a king. He has to be the best [for] his kingdom, the formerly colonized kingdom before they reinstated the kingdom after winning their kingdom from the colonizers. So he's kind of had this pressure on him his entire life of not failing. You can't fail. You can't fall in love. And one of the things in this kingdom is kind of based on the Bluebeard fairy tale, which is the king who keeps taking wives, and there was a four-month marriage trial, and it's very arbitrary, but that's kind of the point. Overall, so it's so they get married. It's kind of like a medieval African Highland kingdom. The Highland chief takes a wife trope where she shows up and obviously she knows much more than him. Like her dream has been to be a queen. She has done anything to become a queen, and everyone assumes it's just because she wants the lifestyle of a queen, but she actually has her own goals. She sees that in her mind that that was the way she could help the most people. There's a whole background story. But basically she shows up. She's been training her whole life to be a queen, and she's not allowed to do anything because queens don't really have power in this kingdom. So, you know, the Highland laird takes a wife, but it's also an examination, again a bit topical, of what happens when people who want to make change are placed in a system that does not want change to happen. And I think – I will be honest that a lot of my RWA feelings went into that. A lot of my feelings about America went into that. And I did have a bit of trouble finishing this book because part of it, not in the same way as *An Unconditional Freedom*, but part of it was, how do I create a good government?

JMF: *Mm hmm.*

AC: What is the solution? And then, like, I can't solve that for every country in the world. I don't think, but I feel like I was able to solve it for this fictional one. For me it's also a look at arranged marriage and marriage and relationships with two people coming together because then, like, they've been married for four months when the book starts or when the first chapter starts. So it's kind of, in a way, a second chance romance for an arranged marriage. So, you know, there's a, there's a lot of stuff going on.

JMF: *It's coming out when?*

AC: December first.

JMF: *Ok, I have a long time to wait.*

AC: Hopefully, hopefully ARCs will be out soon.

JMF: *All right, well thank you so much. This has been such a pleasure. Thank you.*