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Conversation with Gwendolyn Pough/Gwyneth Bolton

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Julie Moody Freeman: *I am pleased to have you here, with both hats that you wear, because I use your books in my class. I read your romance novels, and I use your books in my class on feminist theory. And so I'm overjoyed to have you here to talk about both of those things that you do. Welcome.*

Gwendolyn Pough: I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me [laughter].

JMF: *Yes. And I feel such an affinity with you too because I am an academic. I read romance novels. I've read romance novels since I was eleven years old. And I never wanted to bring that into my academic world because I felt it would take the pleasure away. But somehow, I was able to bring them together and I think that's what I want to talk to you today about how you bring those worlds together. But I want to start with our first love [romance]. Can you start at the beginning and tell me when did you start reading romance and what type of romance novels?*

GP: So, like you I think I was around eleven or twelve years old when I started reading romance novels. My mother used to subscribe to Harlequin Presents. She used to get the six books once a month in the mail. And then it was Silhouettes – I think it was because Silhouette had just come out around that time, and they were a different publisher and they used to send about four or six books. But I remember getting that box of Harlequin Presents and I would read them before she'd read them. I'm reading these Harlequin romance novels, just devouring the whole thing in like a weekend, reading all six of them. So definitely early on, loving those, looking for some Black people in those books even then. I remember we used to have the book club in schools and sometimes they would even have the teen romance novels, and every now and then you'd see like a Black couple on one of those, and I can't even remember the name of those back then. It was like a handful of them I remember being with a Black character and feeling like 'oh, yes.' Definitely from very young, always loved those books and had no idea that a twelve-year-old should not be [laughter] reading them but definitely loving them.

JMF: *I started them at the same age too, sneaking them because my mom didn't know I was reading it [laughter]. She didn't have a problem with it, but I thought she would [laughter].*

GP: Yeah, right. It felt like something so scandalous.

JMF: *Yes [laughter]. So, when did you realize then that you wanted to write… romance novels?*

GP: I knew I wanted to be a writer. Always the little short stories I wrote from around the same time, I wanna say since I was twelve, thirteen, I started writing my own little stories on loose leaf paper. And they were always kind of romantic stories. But I didn't know that I wanted to write romance novels per se, I just knew I wanted to be a writer. So of course, went to school, did creative writing. Now if you ever been in a creative writing program in undergrad or grad school you know that the last thing they're gonna try to get you to write [laughter] is romance. So that kind of takes the romance writer out of you. You know you're supposed to be writing 'serious fiction'.

JMF: *Right*

GP: Right. So, I will say I didn't really say 'I wanna be a romance writer' until I was in my doctoral program. And I used to threaten that I was gonna quit grad school [laughter] and become a romance writer pretty much every day of my doctorate [laughter]. My advisor was talking me down from quitting grad school to go write romance [laughter]. So yeah, that's the first time I remember voicing that 'I want to be a romance writer.'

JMF: *So, did you start writing also in grad school or you still waited a few years before you –*

GP: I still waited a long – even then I kept threatening, and by then Arabesque had come out, so I was getting Arabesque novels. I subscribed to those and I was getting my own box of books once a month with the Black characters, so it felt like a real possibility at that point. That was the first time it felt like something I could do because you had a whole line devoted to African American romance – this was the 90s – devoted to African American romance novels. So, I think before that point, it still didn't feel like a career that I could have because I could still count on one hand before then the amount of Black – every now and then I would see a Black couple on the book. So, I don't even think it even felt like a real possibility to me until Arabesque. And at that point I was in grad school. But I still didn't write anything. It wasn't until I finished writing my academic book, and I'm on the tenure track. I finished *Check It While I Wreck It,* and I realized 'girl you wrote a book. You wrote a whole book; you should write something you really want to write now' [laughter]. So, it was only after I finished the academic book that I started writing my first romance novel. I realized you can actually write a book, so write a novel now.

JMF: *Right, so when you decided to write that first book, what was the creative inspiration? What got you to – and what was that first book?*

GP: The first book was *I'm Gonna Make You Love Me.* And the inspiration was – remember when I told you I was writing these short love stories ever since I was twelve? These characters had been with me since then. They changed a whole lot, but through the years I'd written little versions of this short story of these two characters. So, these characters, Alicia and Darren, had been with me for a long long time. So that had to be the first book that I actually wrote.

JMF: *Right. And you submitted it to Arabesque.*

GP: No, I actually ended up submitting that book to Genesis Press.

JMF: *Yes, I remember Genesis.*

GP: And it came out with Genesis Press. Angelique Justin was the editor at the time.

JMF: *So, was it a complete book? Because I'm thinking about what the relationship is between you, the writer, and the publisher. So, do they shape how it is, what you write or just tiny changes they wanted at the time?*

GP: At the time, I think by the time I submitted to Genesis Press I had finished the book. So, when she wrote back for the full manuscript, I just sent it to her. So, I think at the time there were some issues I had. They wanted me to make the heroine likeable. There was this whole thing. I think I had trouble. In every romance, especially the first two romance novels I wrote, I didn't know that romance characters had to be likeable, nice people all the time [laughter]. The idea that my heroine wasn't likeable. I had to tone her down and make her less of a bitch. Those were the editor's words [laughter].

JMF: *Really?*

GP: But I don't want her to be likeable! That's the point.

JMF: *That's interesting to me. What were some of the things that character was doing that they didn't think that a character should do?*

GP: They didn't like the way she treated the hero –

JMF: *Did she talk back?*

GP: I actually made her a hip-hop feminist. Like she says, 'I'm a hip-hop feminist,' she's very opinionated, very strong willed – everything we wish our Intro to Women's Studies students would be. She's a college student [laughter] she's opinionated, she says what's on her mind, she doesn't care about his feelings, she's very strong willed. So, I think, for them it was because the hero wasn't mean – she was holding a grudge from when they were younger, you know romance [inaudible]. So, they felt like she was just too hard on him.

JMF: *I see. So how much did you tone it down?*

GP: Not that much. Because I'm just like if I change her, then I change the core of her personality. That's who she is. She's not nice. A little bit nice [laughter] a little bit nasty.

JMF: *If we compare her with Karen in* Make It Last Forever – *'cause Karen is sassy. How do they compare, do you think, in personality?*

GP: I think Karen is a little bit more grown-up version. So, the thing with Alicia is she's a college senior, she's not out in the world, she grew up in a privileged home. She's, you know, maybe not as grounded as Karen. I think Karen is more grounded, more grassroots, more – but still very opinionated. I don't know how to write a character that's not – I think I have written some characters that weren't as strong willed as them but my go-to is usually going to be a heroine who is very strong willed, very opinionated, and who is gonna say what's on her mind.

JMF: *I totally love that. So let's then circle back, 'cause I think we'll make it back to* Make It Last Forever*. I want to talk about the book you got published also with Arabesque. Your first one was with Genesis –*

GP: Genesis Press and then the second novel was a part of the launch for Kimani, the Kimani Romance. *If Only You Knew* was the second novel and that was a part of the Kimani launch that Mavis Ellen [did], when she did the Kimani line for Harlequin. So that was like a dream come true, because to grow up reading these romance novels and then being a part of the launch for the first Harlequin African American romance line. I never got a chance to publish with Arabesque because by then Arabesque got bought by Kimani.

JMF: *Was this before BET…?*

GP: BET was before Kimani. Harlequin created their own romance line, Kimani Books and Kimani Romance, to kind of compete with the African American market. Think of it this way: you had all these Black women who most of us were reading Harlequin romance, subscribing to Harlequin romance, buying all these white books, and then you get Arabesque. So that's a lot of money that was going to Arabesque. It didn't start with BET books, BET bought Arabesque from –

JMF: *Kensington.*

GP: – Kensington publishers, and then BET sold Arabesque to Harlequin. And so, we went from having a market that was like 'oh you could publish with Dafina, you could publish Arabesque – and now Harlequin starting a line' to Harlequin gobbling up Arabesque and then publishing opportunities and now they've gotten rid of Kimani.

JMF: *That's right.*

GP: So now we have, what, nothing.

JMF: *Right. Exactly. Yes. I saw that was happening. So, you with Mavis Ellen did that second book.*

GP: Yup the second book was *If Only You Knew.* That book was again where people were telling me that that character, at that time the hero, wasn't likeable. And he wasn't likeable.

JMF: *What was wrong in their eyes?*

GP: I wrote that book, specifically it was a book that I wrote very much thinking that I was going to send it to Harlequin. Before I even knew that there was going to be a Kimani, I was writing that book to send to Harlequin Presents. So we had these global characters, the guy he was from the Bahamas. There were cultural differences. The woman was African American, there was all this cultural stuff. He was like the big mogul. But he was very much a Harlequin Presents kind of hero. And if you've read Harlequin Presents you know that those heroes are very [laughter] not always very likeable, right? So, Mavis was like 'your book is very spot on Harlequin. It was very Harlequin Presents.' And for, I think, a lot of Black women, reading a lot of African American romance novels, we're not reading it to – we don't want to see the Black men as the way these Harlequin – we don't give them the space to be these kind of mean Harlequin Presents heroes.

JMF: *What do you think African American readers, when they're reading Black romance or romance novels by a Black writer, what are we looking for in a character, whether it's a heroine or hero?*

GP: I think that a lot of early romance novels and a lot of what the early romance writers were grappling with readers was the positive images narrative. Like, we wanna see positive Black love, positive Black characters, especially when the narrative from outside is the broken Black family, no father in the home, and the negative images we get from media of

Black love that doesn't exist. So, I think it was a lot of extra pressure on Black romance writers to present these kinds of really positive narratives. I remember some of the early guidelines from Arabesque when I was looking at the guidelines and trying to write books. They had things like 'must wear condom, must –' you know, things in the guidelines, like, you know: 'neither one of them can be seeing another person when they meet and see each other. No cheating, no –' all of the guidelines that are kind of like the typical romance guidelines on steroids. You have to be extra positive.

JMF: *This was coming out of the publisher's guidelines –*

GP: I remember, I might still have the old guidelines from Arabesque, if I can find them, I'll definitely send them to you. And at the time, this was the 90s, so we are dealing with the HIV/AIDS crisis, you know, all this stuff. I think this push for super uber positivity [laughter] was real.

JMF: *Thanks for sharing that. I wondered about it because I looked at some of the early books –1994, 1995 – when they were just coming out, and kept wondering. And I say this also because years ago I was reading romance but for some reason I was always following the publishers and what they were doing and sometimes there would be these guidelines and one of the guidelines, it was for a contest when BET owned Arabesque, I remember it saying something in terms of: 'well, they can have a relationship but they can't live together' [laughter].*

GP: Very strict. Especially when it was BET, especially when it was BET. That extra push to have… And I think the readers got used to that, anything to kind of push those boundaries – I think that's why as a reader myself I started to read self-published people because I felt like they were able to break some of the, to have some, a taboo. To be like stuff that you wouldn't find in a lot of the lines because nobody wants to see just positive, positive, positive all the time. I want to see some nuanced people, not likeable people [laughter.]

JMF: *You know your novel* Sweet Sensation*, I felt that you were doing some of that in there because I think the parents, particularly I think maybe Dee, seemed maybe conservative in the way they thought particularly in terms of marriage. And so, it seemed you were dealing with some of those themes in* Sweet Sensation*.*

GP: Yeah, that and the fact that she grew up and her home was abusive, she had issues with her father, everything wasn't perfect. I think that romance trope that 'oh, she's upper middle class, and two parents and how wonderful,' and I'm just like 'but it wasn't wonderful.' Look at all she had to deal with in this wonderful perfect little home that we're selling in romances, the ideal. And I think that having Flex and Sweet Dee not wanna get married or have the appearance pressure them like 'no we're not gonna get married yet' is kind of a way of resisting.

JMF: *I saw that. You published that one with –*

GP: Genesis Press.

JMF: *That was published with Genesis, so that was an earlier one too. There probably was a sort of push and pull of what could go into it.*

GP: Yeah, and that one was actually a part of a trilogy. So, *I'm Gonna Make You Love Me* is what I was calling my hip-hop debutantes, so each one of them had this kind of like, Black debutante background past. Flex makes an appearance in *I'm Gonna Make You Love M*e and then he's the hero in *Sweet Sensation.*

JMF: *Since we've been talking so much about how you've pushed the boundaries a bit, as much as you possibly could so that could get your characters to be how you wanted them, how you saw them – how much do you think your academic side, your hip-hop feminism, your love of hip-hop, how much of that is informing your writing? I guess I also have a question too of how –obviously your academic came first because you wrote* Check It How I Wreck It*.*

GP: The academic book, yes.

JMF: *Exactly.*

GP: But I mean I was a romance reader. I think my love of romance and my love of hip-hop were happening around close to the same time too. Maybe I was a little bit younger when I started really falling in love with hip-hop. I was gone since 'Rapper's Delight.' That came out when I was 9. And I fell in love with hip-hop. But definitely around that same age, they both had a very strong influence on my background growing up. Hip-hop and romance.

JMF: *Alright so, I'm not a creative writer like you. So, when you're creating a character, are you thinking theory or are you trying to prove something in terms of what feminism should be or does it just sort of come organically?*

GP: I think sometimes it comes organically and then sometimes I really am thinking of some kind of… So with *Sweet Sensation* in particular, or *Make it Last Forever,* I think it's interesting that you picked those two books that you wanna talk about because I do think those are two books of mine where I really really see some of things I tried to argue in my academic work really coming through in the fiction, but I don't think it was, like, on purpose 'cause then it would be more didactic. I do think that the issues that I'm concerned with in terms of the art – I think I wanted *Sweet Sensation* to be like a critique of hip-hop in a lot of ways. You have this woman who used to be a hip-hop artist, but who's had lots of issues with hip-hop, and especially with where she feels that hip-hop has gone. How does that look, from someone who was an artist, Sweet Dee? With *Make it Last Forever,* it was this idea of the sacred and secular, Black communities and where does feminism fit in that, where does hip-hop fit in that? What are the goals in these and how we need both, the sacred and the secular? As a community you can't have one without the other and that's why I kind of had the characters representing some form of sacred, some form of secular, at odds with each other.

JMF: *Right. And it's funny because Karen critiques Darius, but it's funny because she sort of believes he's sort of the soft kind of [laughter], he's a little softy like Will Smith.*

GP: And it's funny, because the backgrounds of them were so much to me, like every time I think about Jada and Will and Tupac [laughter]. And I was like, how do you have two very different rappers fall in love with this woman, what is it about this woman that can capture the hearts of two very different kinds of rappers? Two different kinds of guys in that way.

JMF: *And there's a complex thing going on. Because she talks to him about him being the soft kind of rap artist.*

GP: Bubble gum rap.

JMF: *Yeah and he turns back around, and dude was violent, Shamar was violent. But then it turns back around and with that money he created, he created a community center. So, there was a complexity to that relationship. So, with everybody, you could see himself critiquing. In terms of Black feminism and feminism, that's one of the things I saw coming through because one of the things we do, I call myself a Black feminist too – is the ability to reflect and think about ways in which we might be privileged in certain ways and I see that working through the book.*

GP: Yeah, and how she grapples with trying to do good with his legacy, the good that she honestly believes. Because I believe that true Black feminism isn't really gonna throw everything or everyone away. We are always looking to save, that's the main problem right [laughter]? If Black feminists really were about just throwing people away, the Black community would be…

JMF: *Thank you.*

GP: Okay. 'Cause we'd never throw away. So, I think her grappling with how to reclaim his legacy for good is definitely I think a Black feminist project.

JMF: *Yes, definitely yes. So, the way you have her various incarnations – but tell me what you were working through, what you want people to see, because you have the 1800s and then you have that sort of Black nationalist movement. Late 60s early 70s. And then we have the sort of – when I say current, would be 2000s –*

GP: Yeah.

JMF: *Three different generations*

GP: Very much thinking about that sacred and secular theme. That activist kind of non-activist element, you know. If I was writing it right now, I would have one of them be like 'Black Lives Matter' and 'woke' and the other one be like – you always have this idea of, like, 'well, if you're not doing this thing then you're not for the people', and the different ways that we need all of us to show up, I think is what I was trying to show. You have the woman who's the temperance activist, who is fighting against alcohol and then you got the juke-joint owner. Well, we do need the juke joint too. We need a place to be [laughter]. The juke place owner is just as important to the community as you with your activism and your

pamphlets and all of that. You have the kind of Black power, Black liberation activist. Maybe we didn't need the hustler, but the hustler was doing good for the community too, right? Giving out turkeys and doing – so there are ways in which we need all of us to show up, and I think that's what I was really trying to – what would happen if these two people from different parts of the Black community were able to work it out, and work together, what's the good that could come of that? I think that Karen and… I forget his name.

JMF: *Darius?*

GP: Darius – what's his rapper name?

JMF: *D-Roc.*

GP: Yeah – and D-Roc. Would they… if they could come together, the good that could happen when he starts putting his money into the center and working and volunteering his time and working with her. That's the hope of what we could do together as a community.

JMF: *Right, yeah. I'm drawn to romance novels where the love story is set in centers and institutes. I notice as early as Sandra Kitt setting hers in that HIV – it was for young children with HIV/AIDs. Beverly Jenkins of course is doing it because she's writing in a certain time period where Blacks –*

GP: It's institutions they have to create. They have to create their own institutions, their own towns – ugh, I love Beverly Jenkins. And then even her contemporary, the *Blessings* series that she's writing right now where the sister purchased a formerly all-Black town and they're adopting all these foster kids and bringing them to the town and their raising the foster kids. Yes, I agree that novels that are fun to read but also giving us some hope about how we can deal with this world I think are important, so yeah, I feel you on that.

JMF: *Were you consciously thinking that when you set the novel in that youth center, the Shamar [inaudible] youth center? What were you thinking about? Why did you set it in a center?*

GP: I don't know, I think I wanted Karen to be an activist, about her community, about working with the youth and the easiest way for me to have her do that was to have her have a center, or a center that she was in charge of. I also wanted her to be in charge of the center, so that's why I made it that she started it. Because I wanted her to have a say on whether this rapper was gonna be able to come and volunteer at the center. Because if it wasn't her having a say or having to okay it, then a lot of the tension would've been [put] aside. I think the way she came to me in my head, I just saw her doing this work in the community and the best way I could think of her doing it was if she had a space. If you don't have enough spaces really to do it. So, the need for a space was important and I didn't want her to be working at some other nonprofit run by white folks and all that stuff so she may not be dependent on white money but she [laughter] she is [in] her space.

JMF: *Yes. In* Check It While I Wreck It*, you set up that book where you talk about that interconnection between women activists throughout time, so that you don't see what we're doing in this current period as divorced from what women, Black women, were doing in the 1800s.*

GP: No, definitely. Yup, we are able to do the work we do because club women existed. We can critique maybe some of the ways they went about what they did, all kinds of issues with class and what have you. But nobody is here right now without that work, without that history, without that legacy. So yeah, I do think the legacies are connected. And see you found another strain then [laughter].

JMF: *That's what I've been doing, you know. I've been looking at* Check It While I Wreck It*, and your argument in that book about the interconnection between Black activists between generations, and then you have* Make it Last Forever*, where you have these different reincarnations of Karen as Karo in the 1800s and then the 1960s. And then apparently according to the lady they had some other lives. But they're always Black women working in the community.*

GP: And activists, yeah.

JMF: *And activists. The partner is never – the hero is never there yet. The hero always needs to sort of come to a point where he comes to a realization. For the ones in the 1800s, the ones in the 60s, 70s, they're not there yet, D-Roc is probably the closest that comes to a realization. So, when I started out, I talked about your life as an academic, Black feminist, hip-hop feminist –*

GP: That's a good connection! I didn't see that, girl!

JMF: *[laughter] So that's why I said is it coming organically. It seemed you might be working those things out.*

GP: Yeah, I think that you know as writers we are constantly rethinking and rewriting our work all the time and some of the issues that we continue to grapple with throughout our careers we just continue to grapple with them. And I think some of these issues make it into the fiction because they're stuff that I'm just invested in.

JMF: *Yes, and it's amazing and it's wonderful to use in my classes, to be able to work out these ideas. So, I wanted to ask a little about what are readers' responses and then I'll share with you some of my students' responses. So, what kind of response did you get to – you could pick any book or since we're talking about* Make it Last *or* Sweet Sensation*.*

GP: I think most of the books I've gotten a lot of positive responses from the readers. The books where I've written the most – the *Hightower* series, they loved the Hightowers*.* The cops and the firemen, they loved those. I think the book that I got the most negative response from was *If Only You Knew,* because the hero was a Harlequin Presents kind of hero, and not a nice hero. But I think for some readers *Makes it Last Forever* was a little too woo-woo for them. Not everybody was willing to do the past lives. But for me, another

thing that informed me writing *Make it Last Forever* was Erykah Badu's *Next Lifetime,* and I wanted to call it *Next Lifetime* at first, but the editor made me change it. But that was the title of the book. This idea that you have soulmates and they're meeting across time and [laughter] – but not all readers want to be reading about that kind of woo-woo stuff. The editor made me tone the woo-woo stuff down a lot in *Make It Last Forever.*

JMF: *That's what I loved about the book [laughter].*

GP: That's what I loved the most.

JMF: *I think if you write fiction you ought to be able to write anything you want [laughter]. So, my students. There were two debates in my class. The first debate had to with – so in the center there was a little boy, a young man, who was selling drugs. And she, Karen said she would call the police. So, I've taught the book before Ferguson and after Ferguson. Before Ferguson we didn't have a debate about that. After Ferguson there was a debate in that class because one person felt that she should not, in an age that we live in where picking up the phone and calling the police can end in your death.*

GP: Yeah but that wasn't when I was writing the book –

JMF: *That's what I tried to tell them!*

GP: If I was writing this now I would definitely – it's not even coming up, a little bit. I wouldn't even write the Hightowers now, honestly. I am so over – [laughter] I don't wanna write no cop heroes, y'all not heroes. Like, literally.

JMF: *I think the beauty of having your books is that you can engage with the things in there and it allows you to open up and talk about broader issues, do some comparisons and talk about a different time period that you're writing in. And I have to say to them, 'listen, this –'*

GP: The other thing, I think the Black feminist issue that I would have – I say I wouldn't have her – Did she call the cops or did she just threaten…?

JMF: *She just threatened.*

GP: She just threatened, and I don't think she would have called the cops, but I do think she was trying to strike a chord of fear in him. Kind of like a scared straight kind of thing. But I think the other part of it too that I think we grapple with as Black feminists and as a Black community and the Black feminist part of it for me is that, yes, the cops are killing us. But for Black women, Black men are killing us too. So, if we can't call the cops, what can we do? So that idea of how do we as a community survive if we are not able to really say that sometimes the harm is coming from within our communities and how are we going to deal with this?

JMF: *Yeah, that was one of the other reactions too in the class is that they're like 'this child, by dealing drugs to others, is really infecting the entire –'*

GP: Yeah, and in the space that she is trying to create as a safe haven for other Black youth, Black and Brown youth.

JMF: *We had a wonderful discussion over that. I think that we're not going to solve the problem, but we're able to debate those things that we're dealing with on the ground. So one more debate that happened is when we're at the end of it now, and close to the end of the novel, D-Roc and his crew charge into Karen's house and Karen at the time has – I forgot, he was the guy who helped her with the grant writing and –*

GP: Yes, yes, now I almost forgot his name.

JMF: *The name jumped out of my –*

GP: And he's bad.

JMF: *He's bad, he's really bad. But he's come back from so-called Africa – he's not been to Africa – he asked to stay with her. D-Roc now realizes that his grandmother is the one that caused all those deaths. He charges into Karen, and Karen comes out and she's like in panties and a tee shirt, I think. And then the guys are there too. And D-Roc tells her, 'go put some clothes on' or something like that. And my students are like 'what? A Black feminist having a character tell her to go put on some panties' and my class started [laughter] another debate. Again, I think the book allows us to have these real discussions so that Black feminism is not this theoretical anymore.*

GP: Yeah, it's a lived experience. And how you live your Black feminism every day in your lives, in your partnerships, with your husbands, with your boyfriends may not look the same as everyone else's Black feminism.

JMF: *Yes, that's why I love teaching these books [laughter]. And I'm going to be teaching a Black Feminist Theory class and I'm going to be teaching it there also, because right now I'm teaching it in a class on Romance, Gender and Race.*

GP: Ooh that sounds so fun!

JMF: *It's nothing but romance novels by Black writers.*

GP: Can I take that class next time you teach it [laughter]?

JMF: *Yes, you can. So, I just love that about the books, that we're able to talk about real life issues and particularly yours because when you're talking about Black feminism and who is a Black feminist and what does that look like. It allows us to play with those ideas, to work them through and have those discussions.*

GP: Yeah, that would have been a good discussion.

JMF: *Oh yes, we have fun. So last question. What are you currently working on? Are you working on any romance novels, thinking about anything for the future?*

GP: I am. I'm trying to finish an academic book right now so my book club books finally, I'm trying to get that to the publisher.

JMF: *Could you talk a little about that?*

GP: There's a chapter on romance in there too. It's tentatively titled *Sister Girl Literacies: Black Women Writers and Readers, Readers and Writers*. It started out as a book on Black book clubs and that's kind of how I started writing romance too. I was doing research on Black readers and Black book clubs and went to all these literacy events and started reading fiction again, heavily reading fiction, and was like 'hmm, yeah I should write.' So, I've been working on this book a long time, it's time for it to come out. Once I'm done with that, I'm hoping to start writing fiction again. It's just hard. I think that when I was finishing my last romance novel my mom passed away. I was finishing up my first stint as department chair. Now I'm chair again, so it's been a minute. And I just wasn't feeling very happily ever after, after my mom passed away. But I'm starting to feel romance-y again a little bit. But whatever I write it may be kind of in the more women's fiction rom-com kind of era. Either that or I would have to self-publish. I wanna write more grittier stuff. I don't want to be bound by the rules of Black romance.

JMF: *What about the rules of 'happily ever after?'*

GP: Definitely 'happily ever after' in the romance stuff. But If I do the more women's fiction, rom-com-y stuff, I don't know. I don't know [laughter].

JMF: *Alright. Thank you so much, I enjoyed having this conversation.*

GP: This was wonderful. Thanks for thinking of me.