

Freedom's Epilogue: Love as Freedom in Alyssa Cole's Historical Novellas

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In 2021, novelist Alyssa Cole argued in an interview with NPR that “romance itself is political, particularly when you’re talking about diversity – who is considered a whole person, who is able to live their full lives” (Garcia-Navarro). As Cole notes, who gets to love and be loved in (romance) media is political, especially in a genre that so often centers whiteness and white womanhood at the pinnacle of feminist freedoms. But no subgenre in romance more clearly exemplifies the often slow-walk of progress better than historical romance, where Black authors were, until very recently, few and far between, and Black characters finding their Happily Ever Afters (HEA) together still seem rare. This omission of the presence and progressive power of Black love in historical romance is curious, not least because of Black historians’ decades-long dedication to recovering love as an important aspect of Black history. But if one puts Alyssa Cole’s self-published Black romance novellas, *Be Not Afraid* and *That Could Be Enough*, in conversation with Black

histories of love and emotion, one can see the political work in Cole's depiction of Black love in historical romance as she expands a genre so long resistant to change.

Pamela Newkirk begins her collection of love letters from slavery to freedom by stating that the volume is meant to "bear witness to the love that has sustained African Americans throughout their turbulent history in America" (xv). In the field of African American history, so much of the bearing witness scholars have done has been toward the pain, injustice and activism, while only giving passing and inconsistent attention to the many other aspects of life that made survival vital and possible – with the exception of religion. And yet, there was so much more: more laughter, more joy, and so much love. Pain in the Black past was often tempered by joy and vice versa, so for historians and writers to bear witness to one, they must necessarily involve the other, which Newkirk's volume demonstrates in beautiful snippets. But how might the complicated relationship between love and pain figure into the HEA of a romance novel when the characters are enslaved or living in the time of slavery?

In her discussion of Beverly Jenkins' *Indigo*, Rita B. Dandridge asserts that Hester and Galen's HEA is not located at the end of the book but would have to exist at some point in the future: "As a married woman, Hester has a good husband, has found her mother, and is pregnant with her first child. Despite this good fortune, she believes that only the end of slavery can make her life complete" (36). Freedom figures prominently as a theme in Black historical romances – whether the characters are enslaved or free – and the HEA of the individual couple often seems bound to the freedom of the Black community at large; finding romantic love is so rarely the sum total of a HEA. Rather, the creation of a social, political, and economic environment in which that love and any fruit it bears, can flourish safely is, or would be, the achievement of a true HEA. Thus, as Dandridge notes about Jenkins' *Indigo*, "hope of a better future," i.e. slavery's end, is the ultimate, unwritten epilogue, to Black historical romances set in slavery, including Cole's novellas *Be Not Afraid* and *That Could Be Enough*, set during the American Revolutionary War and Revolutionary Age New York (36).

In *Talking Back*, bell hooks argued that "we need to concentrate on the politicization of love... a critical discussion where love can be understood as a powerful force that challenges and resists domination" (26). And in another text, hooks notes, in a brief discussion of African American history, the importance of taking up love in scholarly analysis:

Early on in our nation's history, when white settlers colonized Africans...they justified these acts of racial aggression by claiming that black people were not fully human. In particular it was in relation to matters of the heart, of care and love, that the colonizers drew examples to prove that black folk were dehumanized, that we lacked the range of emotions accepted as a norm among civilized folk. In the racist mindset the enslaved African was incapable of deep feeling and fine emotions. Since love was considered to be a finer sentiment, black folks were seen as lacking the capacity to love. When slavery ended, many of the racist stereotypes that had been used to subordinate and alienate black people were challenged. But the question of whether or not black people were capable of love, of deep and complex emotions, continued to be a subject for heated discussion and debate (hooks, *Salvation*, xix).

Throughout much of her work, hooks advocates for a deepening contextualization of Black American history, life, and culture, that centers love as part of projects that further humanize those so often dehumanized.

Similarly, in an interview with scholar Julie Moody-Freeman, Cole notes the inspiration for her own work as rejecting racism and pain as the singular narratives of Black life:

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... friendships, there's playing with children.

Cole's focus on the emotional interiority of Black life is echoed in the scholarship. Historian Daina Ramey Berry's *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* centers on the literal monetary value of enslaved bodies. But a much subtler and impactful thread in the text is the author's analysis of the community value of those same bodies for the enslaved. The author argues for the acknowledgement of the "soul or spirit value," in other words, the value that enslaved people placed on their own lives and those of the ones they loved. This was

an intangible marker that often defied monetization yet spoke to the spirit and soul of who they were as human beings. It represented the self-worth of enslaved people. For some, this meant that no monetary value could allow them to comply with slavery. Others, weakened by enslavement negotiated certain levels of commodification to survive their experience. Still others were socially dead. While the value of the soul should not be located on a spectrum, this book addresses their living soul values, seeking to uncover 'what the enslaved actually made of their situation' (Berry 6).

I would argue, to an extent, that the value Berry identifies was love.

Berry's work is but one example of contemporary historical scholarship that has sought to uncover and explicate on the emotional lives of Black Americans throughout their history of enslavement and Jim Crow racism. But in truth, these texts are only isolating what so many of the primary sources have been telling us for far longer. In the sources left by Black ancestors, the bonds of family, friendship, and romantic love were powerful forces that pushed and pulled the enslaved and free to act in way that defined freedom outside the bounds of white society.

Consider, for instance, Harriet Jacobs' description of her preparation to hide away from her owner: "I feared the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart; but I could not go into the uncertain future without one last look" (107). Her anguish at leaving her children and extended family both pushed Jacobs to run away while also constraining the distance she was willing to travel. Or consider Abream Scriven's letter to his wife upon being sold away.

My Dear Wife,

I take the pleasure of writing you these few with much regret to inform you that I am sold to a man by the name of Peterson atreader and Stays in new orleans. I am here yet But I expect to go before long but when I get there I will write and let you know where I am. My Dear I want to Send you some things but I donot know who to Send them by but I will thry to get them to you and my children. Give my love to my father and mother and tell them good Bye for me. and if we Shall not meet in this world I hope to meet in heaven. My Dear wife for you and my children my pen cannot Express the griffe I feel to be parted from you all
I remain your truly husband until death [sic] (Newkirk 7).

One need only look through the myriad sources left by African Americans during slavery to see the ways in which love was central to their survival in a country built on their dehumanization and commodification, and the ways in which love shaped their vision of what freedom could, and would, mean once obtained.

Cole's novellas demonstrate love and the search for freedom in all the complicated beauty of Black life in the Revolutionary age. *Be Not Afraid* and *That Could Be Enough* embody bell hooks' suggestion that by refocusing attention on the politicization of love, we can understand it "as a powerful force that challenges and resists domination" (hooks, *Talking Back*, 26). Both texts move the historical narrative of the Revolutionary Age away from empty rhetoric toward a concrete and complicated discussion of how enslaved and free Black people defined freedom for themselves. Cole's characters are as conflicted about their place in the new nation as the nation is of them, embodying Frederick Douglass' 1852 question about "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro":

What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?... I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine.

In both novellas, centering on two generations of a single family, Cole illustrates the ways in which Black soldiers and contraband understood the stakes of the Revolutionary War, as well as the potential promise in the young nation for queer Black women. The novellas center Black definitions of freedom in uncertain times as bound to varied expressions of love.

Be Not Afraid opens with Elijah Sutton, a Black soldier fighting for the colonial army, watching as Kate, a British camp follower, kills a British soldier for attempting to attack her. When a British regiment comes across the two, Kate inadvertently frames Elijah for the murder and pretends to faint, leaving Elijah to be taken as a prisoner of war. Over the course of Elijah's imprisonment, the two repeatedly encounter one another in a British

camp and battle over the literal possibilities of freedom as offered by both sides of the conflict.

Elijah is serving in the war in place of his owner – a man he notes was “as kind to me as one can be to a man he owns like chattel” – who promised him freedom upon the war’s conclusion (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 47). Kate, on the other hand, puts her tentative faith in the possibility of Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation of 1775, which promised freedom to any enslaved person who aided the British effort, but she notes in her first conversation with Elijah a much deeper ambivalence:

‘Don’t mistake my choice for approval. The British are simply the lesser of two evils... Some folk may choose to stick with the devil they know. But the devil you know is still a devil, and when this war is over, he’ll send you straight to hell whether he wins or loses’ (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 14-15).

It would be easy to read this novella as another long-rehearsed narrative about the founding of the nation, pitting British imperialism against American democratic ideals, especially since, at the end of the novella, Kate abandons the British camp to escape back to the American side with Elijah and the novel ends with the two living in freedom with their adopted daughter. But rather than representing white American and white British objectives in the conflict, Kate and Elijah’s actions closely align with the deep-seated yearnings for freedom that underscored the decisions of the enslaved during the conflict, best exemplified through Kate’s narrative arc.

Unlike Elijah, Kate was born in West Africa and her life was touched by repeated abuse and loss. The beginning of her story can be best exemplified by two poignant and heartbreaking assertions; first her own, “I have no people,” and then the narration that “everything Kate knew of ‘love’ made her wish to never hear the word again” (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 21). While Elijah is not naive about the brutal realities of slavery, his experience of it was markedly different and the hopefulness that marks his personality is something Kate does not believe herself capable of achieving, nor does she want to at the beginning of the story.

The historical experiences of enslaved women on which Cole builds Kate’s characterization are strongly connected to the deep historical work begun by historians like Deborah Gray White to uncover and illuminate the gendered nature of Black women’s enslavement. In her groundbreaking history of enslaved women in the antebellum south, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White argued for sustained study of the enslavement of women explicitly by critiquing their erasure in the historiography of slavery before the 1980s. “Slave women were everywhere, yet nowhere,” in the plantation household, in the field, but deemed unworthy of consideration; integral but unseen (White 23). Similarly, later scholars have discussed in painstaking detail the ways in which slavery was built on the sexual exploitation of enslaved women in too many studies to name, belying their erasure in early historical texts.

But crucially, *Be Not Afraid* reminds readers that enslaved men did see enslaved women and Elijah sees Kate. When Elijah and the other Black male prisoners are being courted as double agents, “Elijah looked around the room, at the Black women bustling to serve and clear. Was this the brave new world that the British were offering?” (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 40). To be seen by Elijah was not a small or inconsequential thing. Rather, it was a

deeply affecting distinction – for Kate and the reader – from the abusive attentions of white men. As noted, Kate’s previous understandings of love were shaped by sexual assault, loss, and grief, and Elijah redefines the word to her through word and deed.

As Kate and Elijah’s relationship builds, their very different understandings of the future provide their point of intellectual and emotional connections and their conflict. While Elijah wants to lay claim to a country he and other Black people built literally on their backs, Kate is as ambivalent about the British forces as the Americans. She is haunted by what slavery has taken from her – her name, her child, and bodily autonomy – but even her capacity to hope. It is not that she necessarily believes in the British cause, but simply that she is unable to believe in the future America that Elijah believes is possible. And at its heart, their romance is built around a loving conversation of what their freedom could mean in a postwar world.

In *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage*, Tera Hunter argues that legalizing their marriages was central to Black community conceptualizations of freedom: “African Americans understood the importance of contesting the standing of their relationships as integral to any prospects that freedom might hold for them on the most basic level” (7). This did not mean, however, that marriage was the path to freedom, simply that “slaves and free blacks knew that their future as liberated people was less certain” if their marriages were not officially recognized outside of their communities (Hunter 7). *Be Not Afraid’s* epilogue, then, is layered with historical and community meaning.

Epilogues in romances can take many forms and serve many functions. At their core, they can cement the fulfillment of the couple’s major internal and external conflicts and the realization of the HEAs, often by jumping ahead into the future. Authors can achieve these goals in a myriad of ways, including by showing a wedding or pregnancy in the central relationship’s future, especially popular in historical romances. But *Be Not Afraid* challenges the purpose of a traditional epilogue structure. Even though Kate and Elijah have achieved their freedom, married, and adopted a daughter, they still live in a country where slavery remains legal in various territories. Their futures, remain uncertain and they continue to live with the physical and emotional scars of the past. Thus their epilogue is reflective of an ending without a neat resolution; they have found love, but freedom is precarious.

For instance, Elijah’s physical scars from the war are tempered by a free life where he is able to have a wife, a family, and a free Black community. Similarly, Kate’s deep suspicion about freedom has not been fully erased, like the scars it left on her emotionally: “She would never lose the dread that her happiness could be snatched away from her; no amount of love and security could pry away the clinging knowledge of experience” (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 78). Kate and Elijah’s post-slavery lives are reflective of a painful historical reality. Consider, for instance, the narrative of Solomon Northrup in *Twelve Years a Slave* and the havoc caused by the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which put all Black people – freeborn, freed, or fugitive – in danger of being enslaved based on the caprices of white slave catchers.

Still, Kate and Elijah’s epilogue is full of hope:

Elijah had returned from Yorktown in one piece, but his years on the battlefield affected him in other ways. Now the chill seeped into his knees and ankles, settling in with an ache that he grit his teeth against. That didn’t

stop him from spending his days out with the horses, calling on the surrounding farms, or being active in the Colored community. And even when the pain hit him hard, that didn't stop him from being kind (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 77).

And while thinking of the privileges of their daughter Charlotte's free status, Kate sees hope in a future America that she had been unable to envision for herself: "In this new country, this new America, maybe one day every little Black girl would have that choice" to eschew work and be children (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 78).

Cole completes Kate's individual arc by affirming what Tera Hunter argues about the importance of marriage in defining freedom; marriage provided a buttress from the world outside. Kate begins the novella with "no people" and ends with a husband, a child, a community, and hope where she had none. By the end of the novella, Kate is able to assert, "I am home" (Cole, *Be Not Afraid* 82 & 21). But the completion of her individual arc is only one piece of a larger puzzle. For Black people, "Marriage was seen as a vehicle for advancing the interests of the group, not just a privilege to be enjoyed by individual couples," as were families and communities (Hunter 17). Kate and Elijah's happily ever after is representative of a quilting effort that defined Black families during and after slavery, which were not completely linear, nuclear, or circumscribed, they were broad, diverse, and inclusive, partially because they had no other choice.

Fictive kinship is the practice of valuing without distinction bonds between people as familial, regardless of their actual blood relationship. As Peter H. Wood notes, the historical necessity of fictive kinship for the enslaved was vital:

Extended slave families reached across generations and linked separate plantations. They were constantly being broken apart and reformed in new ways, adapting to meet the changing and unkind circumstances of plantation life. These emerging family networks played an important role in transmitting cultural patterns and preserving African values...families fostered loyalty and trust; they conveyed information and belief; they provided a strong shelter within which to hide and a reliable launching pad from which to venture forth. By providing much-needed solace and support, the positive ties of family gave encouragement to individuals and groups who were coming together, against formidable odds, to forge the beginnings of a common culture (85).

In this way, *Be Not Afraid's* epilogue illustrates the ways in which Black American historical romances can build on the beautiful and layered importance of love, family, and community in Black history:

People of African descent had, of necessity, become adept at forging kin-like networks as they were severed from communities of origin and thrust into slave ships among strangers taking them to the Americas. Black families under slavery were nothing if not practical, adaptive, and creative in combining natal and social ties to meet the needs of emotional and material sustenance from birth to death (Hunter 18).

Kate, Elijah, and Charlotte come together from different continents and with no blood connections other than their individual yearnings for freedom and home, and then they are bound together by love.

This epilogue then is not an ending, but a beginning. Alyssa Cole's *That Could Be Enough* could be understood as an extended epilogue of *Be Not Afraid*. What Kate and Elijah build immediately after the Revolutionary Era, builds into the life of their granddaughter, Andromeda, illustrating that freedom is not an individual pursuit.

In *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, historian Hasan Jeffries argues that freedom was not an ephemeral concept for newly freed people at the conclusion of the Civil War: "At the moment of emancipation, they reflected on their enslavement and identified their freedom rights, or those civil and human rights that slaveholders denied them" (8). In the complex social, political, economic, individual and community rights that defined Black aspirations, one sees the ways in which love, family and community were at the very center of Black conceptualizations of freedom. Among the list Jeffries articulates were the rights to own property, enjoy economic security, marry and start a family, and education because "African Americans recognized the importance of freedom rights during slavery. Their bondage made clear that freedom rights were not only essential to living *meaningful* lives, but also the key to power within society" (8). While some items on this list were tied specifically to the post-Civil War period, just as many were not. Freedom was contextual, communal, and individual all at the same time, for the enslaved and the free. In *That Could Be Enough*, Cole illustrates the ways in which even free Black people who lived in the shadows of slavery participated in this process of defining freedom. In this novella, the traditional markers of freedom – education, freedom of movement, and the right to vote, for instance – only fully take shape and blossom in the communal context of love and are central to the ways in which Mercy and Andromeda give shape to their free lives, even though they did not directly experience slavery.

That Could Be Enough is set two generations after *Be Not Afraid*, focusing on the relationship between Andromeda Stein, Kate and Elijah's granddaughter, and Mercy Alston, the personal maid of Eliza Hamilton. The story was originally published as part of the *Hamilton's Battalion* anthology. The novella considers similar themes as its predecessor but in the context of freedom from enslavement, rather than searching for it. In telling the story of two queer Black women in the post-Revolutionary War era, Cole illustrates the ways in which community love and care still provide the foundation of Black American definitions of freedom.

Much like Kate, Mercy's life has been shaped by the absence of love and an ambivalence – if not fear – of the havoc it can wreak on her life: "Mercy spoke of love as if it was muck she had to clean out of fine lace" (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, location 405). She comments on it not just disdainfully but fearfully. "Love is impractical and unrealistic, and indulging it to such a degree is unsavory" (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, location 409). On the other hand, Andromeda had known two generations free to love whom they chose, and as a queer Black woman, that was as much her inheritance as any material thing; maybe even her most importance inheritance: "Andromeda had loved before, and she didn't doubt its power" (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, location 406). She is freely expressive of her desire for Mercy and other women in ways Mercy feels unable. Mercy's fear of accepting her own sexuality centers at once around what she views as her parents' obsessive love – which led them to die within days of one another, orphaning her – and the specific rejection of a

former lover. Mercy fears that love will rob her of the life she has crafted for herself, however lonely.

Mercy's story, again like Kate's, is the answer to Andromeda's question: "What did loss do to a person?" (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, Chapter 3). Or in Tera Hunter's questioning words, "How far could they go in the world without beloved kin?" (7). Mercy is both afraid of love while yearning for it and she has created a hard shell around her emotions as a means of protection. But as bell hooks notes in *All About Love*, "Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion" (215). In this way, Mercy's arc is not solely centered on finding a lover. She must also find a community; or a home, as Kate had at the end of her novella.

As their courtship unfolds in fits and starts, Mercy embodies Andromeda's desire to achieve the same kind of domestic happiness as her parents and grandparents:

Andromeda looked up at Mercy, imagining what their life could be like together. There would be spats and disagreements over trivial things, to be certain, but there would be days at the Grove and Lady Bess's. Conversations with friends. Quiet nights in front of a shared fire as Andromeda sewed and Mercy wrote. Not-so-quiet nights when they retired to their bed early. They might have all that ahead of them, and Andromeda was champing at the bit, to be sure, but she would be patient. For this, she could be patient (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, Chapter 12).

For Mercy, Andromeda represents both the possibility of finding and keeping love as a queer woman and acceptance in a community to which she can be useful; things Andromeda understood as her birthright: "Grandfather always told me that it didn't matter who a person loved, but how well they treated others and what they did to make this country and this world better" (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, Chapter 4). Andromeda is Mercy's window to a world from which she had spent ten years hiding and their happily ever after is the achievement of both women's deepest desires, which Mercy outlines in a letter to Mrs. Hamilton in her own epilogue: "Both the boarding house and Andromeda's dress shop are flourishing, and she is already looking for her next investment. I volunteer my services at the orphanage twice a week, teaching the children to read and write, and a few of my poems have been published in local papers," a marked difference from the "simple, orderly life" she had at the novella's start (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, Epilogue & Chapter 1).

It is thus important to note that Mercy begins her novella alone in some ways, dissatisfied with her life but ends up as part of a larger whole. hooks asserts that "Whenever we heal family wounds, we strengthen community. Doing this, we engage in loving practice. That love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go" (*All About Love*, 144). Mercy and Andromeda's love story, like Kate and Elijah's, shatters the supposed distinction between the individual, familial and communal. And the points at which Kate and Elijah's narrative veer away from genre conventions, illustrate more than anything their adherence to the historical narrative. Dandridge calls *Indigo's* ending a "delayed birth of freedom," which seems fitting for Kate and Elijah as well (35). Their freedom has not come without significant loss, nor has the resolution of their romantic arc solved the

problem of slavery or made freedom entirely secure for them or all of their people, because securing freedom rights required communal work. Cole's novellas are centered on a journey toward love *and* freedom where each builds on and reinforces the other. Kate and Elijah's romance makes room for Andromeda and Mercy's, while the latter romance gives the reader the narrative security that the HEA of the former is finally secured.

In *Be Not Afraid*, Kate wonders, after her first kiss with Elijah: "*What would it be like to be loved by a man like Elijah Sutton? A man who was strong and kind-hearted?*" (Cole, *Be Not Afraid*, 21, italics in original). And when Andromeda asks Mercy what she wants from life, she freezes: "She'd only just allowed herself the possibility of love; could she ask for anything more? Was that allowed to her?" (Cole, *That Could Be Enough*, Chapter 10). Cole demonstrates the importance of love, not as the HEA itself, but as a vehicle through which freedom might be attained and protected. One need not stretch their imagination to think of Kate and Elijah's particular HEA as the beginning of many love stories. If one understands Black HEAs as the search for communal and romantic love as a means to secure freedom throughout Alyssa Cole's historical works – not through direct lineage, but fictive kinship – then just as the Revolutionary Era builds into the Civil War, these novellas serve as a significant precursor to the author's Loyal League series and her twentieth century historical novellas (*Let Us Dream* and *Let It Shine*).

Rita Dandridge's work offers a useful framework to think past, or rethink altogether, the epilogue in Black historical romances and beyond. Elsa Barkley Brown once described Black women's history as "a polyrhythmic, 'nonsymmetrical,' nonlinear structure in which individual and community are not competing identities" (926). It is no stretch to consider Alyssa Cole as connected to a collection of writers – inside and outside of academia – who seek to make their work part of "a love ethic [which] presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" in their Black historical work (hooks, *All About Love*, 87). African Americans often reflect on the strength and resiliency of their ancestors to understand and reflect on the privileges and freedoms they enjoy. Thus, what Alyssa Cole offers in *Be Not Afraid* and *That Could Be Enough* are two pieces in a longer HEA; constellations in a larger galaxy of HEAs, achieved through the ending of slavery and fights to define and defend community freedoms.

In late 2020, a section of the online romance community called Romancelandia turned their eyes toward raising funds to support the Democratic candidates in the Georgia runoff election. Their efforts were organized by romance authors Alyssa Cole, Courtney Milan and Kit Rocha (pen name of writing duo Bree Bridges and Donna Herren) in support of Stacey Abrams, romance author Selena Montgomery, and her community organizing efforts to support democratic elections in Georgia. Eventually the group helped raise nearly four hundred thousand dollars and contributed to the election of Democratic Senators Reverend Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff.

In the positive media that emerged in response to the community's effort, journalists often argued for a reconsideration around the "stigma" attached to writing and reading romance, arguing that "outsiders" should see that "Romance is a political genre" (Sheppard). Less than a year later however, Romance Writers of America (RWA) awarded the inaugural Vivian Award in inspirational romance to an historical romance featuring a hero who had participated in the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, forcing the organization to, once again, confront its own history of discrimination (Ammidown 2021). If romance is a political genre, then its politics must be defined as much by the Vivians

controversy as *Romancing the Runoff*. But in the perpetual maelstrom around defining the political stakes of romance, a writer like Alyssa Cole, and her work, stand out.

About *Romancing the Runoff*, Cole argued that “the same fight for diversity, equality, [and] inclusiveness” have clarified to the community “what they value in a book and how that measures with what they value in reality” (Sheppard). Throughout her work, Cole demonstrates her values again and again; justice, freedom, supporting and depicting the fullness of Black communities, and making space for all of these things in romance. One can identify these as deeply held convictions in her life, even in just a casual perusal of her online presence. In the summer of 2021, she partnered with the Women’s Prison Book Project to donate books by Black authors to incarcerated readers in celebration of her birthday. She has also held virtual book events with Loyalty Bookstore, a queer, Black women-owned bookstore, beginning in summer 2020, featuring a diverse collection of debut and established authors, global BIPOC and queer authors, who were self- and traditionally published, exposing them to wider audiences. Cole has also shown her dedication to diversifying the romance community using her sizeable platform. Thus, if romance really is political, we must acknowledge that all romance novels and novelists’ politics are not the same. What Cole demonstrates in her activism and in the breadth of her catalog is that there must always be room for as much love, in as many forms as possible, to achieve the full scope of any happily ever after.

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