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Reading the Black Romance: Exploring Black Sexual Politics in the Romance Fiction of Rebekah Weatherspoon

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I started reading romance novels around the same time that Sanaa Latham was asking, "When did you fall in love with hip hop?" in the 2002 film *Brown Sugar*. In the film, Latham portrays Sidney, a successful editor of a hip-hop magazine, who develops romantic feelings for her best friend, Dre, played by Taye Diggs. This friends-to-lovers story is complicated by a series of missed opportunities, mixed signals, and a refusal to confront complex emotions. Both Sidney and Dre find love with other people before they both realize that their happy ending is with each other. Looking at the film now, 20 years later, *Brown Sugar*, when read closely, is an interesting study of Black sexual politics in its depictions of the relationships among the main and secondary characters. As a 17-year-old Black girl in 2002 watching this film, however, I was simply infatuated with its depictions of Black womanhood.

Coming of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s meant I was surrounded by Black culture on television and in movies. While I was aware of the stereotypes that depicted Black women as undesirable in popular media, I was actively seeking out television shows and films that countered those images. I was invested in seeing Black women succeed at love and life because it meant that I could too. My literary world at the time was populated

by white authors. I was introduced to romance fiction through Nora Roberts, Sandra Brown, and Jennifer Crusie, and I later developed a love of British "chick-lit" through reading titles from Sophie Kinsella and Marian Keyes. Because I did not actively seek out Black or interracial romance novels until my mid-20s, I missed out on authors like Sandra Kitt, Donna Hill, Brenda Jackson, and Beverly Jenkins during that crucial time of my life when I was learning, through personal experience, that Black love could be messy. It could be full of heartbreak, sorrow, and rage, and ultimately, emotional turmoil caused by a Black man who was not yet ready to be a husband or a father. Consequently, the romantic desires, boundaries, and expectations that I formed as a teenager erased Black men as viable romantic heroes in my young imagination. Although I adored Black romantic films, I knew that the fantasy of a happy ending in Black romance was simply that, a fantasy.

In *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Brittney Cooper writes:

> Black men frequently don't acknowledge our vulnerability, don't seem to think we need defending, and don't feel a political responsibility to hold Black women (who aren't their mothers or sisters or daughters) up and honor them. Patriarchy numbs men's collective pain sensors, and it causes Black men to not see Black women as worthy of care and concern (93).

This criticism is important because it unpacks the patriarchal constraints and gender ideology of Black men in genre romance. As a Black reader of romance, I read romance novels because I want to connect with the freedom of being vulnerable and fragile as a woman in a society that insists I be a strong Black woman full of magic. Like many readers, I bring my experience with me to every novel I read. This experience includes the distrust and the disappointment that surface with patriarchal ideals about Black masculinity that often hinder my ability to see Black men – be they fathers, brothers, or friends – as protectors and sources of stability. I have a love-hate relationship with Black romance in that I love that it prioritizes the care of Black women but hate how my skepticism of Black men as romance heroes ruins the fantasy of the genre. This skepticism, however, fuels my research of popular romance studies, Black Romance history, and most importantly, Black women as readers and writers of romance novels. Understanding how the genre and its authors interpret Black sexual politics is crucial to understanding why the genre is so appealing to its readers, especially those readers, like me, who have complex relationships with Black love.

In this essay, I examine Rebekah Weatherspoon's *Beards and Bondage* erotic romance series that is a study of Black feminist love stories that aim to position Black women as both a consideration and a priority. My study of the sexual politics in Weatherspoon's work explores the complexities of intimate love relationships, Black gender ideology, and sexual exploration in romances where Black women are the central protagonists. I consider what Evelyn Hammonds describes as a politics of articulation in Black feminist theory that is inclusive of Black lesbian and queer experiences. These experiences foreground female desire and agency and disrupt the politics of silence that surrounds Black female sexuality, thereby encouraging the analysis of pleasure, exploration, and agency (Hammonds 97).

Historically, the expression of Black female sexuality has been entangled with respectability politics. In maintaining the performance of respectable middle-class womanhood, Black women stayed away from sexual discourse in the public sphere to distance themselves from the common stereotype of the Jezebel, a controlling image derived during the era of slavery that defined Black women as hypersexual and lascivious in nature. Maintaining a culture of silence was about survival under a white gaze that devalued Black women's worth and positionality within a social and racial hierarchy. By projecting the image of a "super moral" woman, Black women hoped to garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity (Hammonds 97), therefore, it is no wonder that literary depictions of Black women's pleasurable sexuality remain understudied, even within the scope of Black feminism.

I read Weatherspoon's erotic romances as Black feminist texts that disrupt the politics of silence that have shaped Black sexuality and womanhood. In an interview for the Black Romance Podcast, Weatherspoon explains that she wanted to write books where Black women are seen as full human beings because in popular media Black women are often portrayed in negative and harmful circumstances (Moody-Freeman 9). Her Black and interracial romances explore the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Further, her series reflects how loving Black women is a rebellious act. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, resistance consists of loving the unlovable and affirming their humanity (250). This essay opens a critical dialog among Black women who appreciate the value of romance that humanizes us and acknowledges and centers our joy, our pleasure, our care, and our vulnerability.

A History of Black Romance

In 1974, *Loving Her* by Ann Allen Shockley was published as the first biracial lesbian romance that featured a Black lesbian protagonist. While it maintains the conventions of traditional romance fiction, such as the requisite happily-ever-after ending, the novel is shaped by the Black feminist politics of the era. It centers the relationship of Renay, an African American musician who is stuck in an abusive marriage, and Terry, a prominent and wealthy white writer. In Renay's journey to leave her oppressive marriage and accept the life and love that Terry offers, Shockley examines the interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. She articulates Black women's desire and sexuality in a manner that places her Black protagonist in a position of power and exploration, allowing her to process and move past experiences of trauma and violence. *Loving Her* is a study into how romance fiction is a tool for exploring sexual politics, gender ideology, and the articulation of Black women's desire in narratives where Black women and their lived experiences are centered.

Although Shockley's *Loving Her* is considered an interracial romance, I include it in the early history of Black genre romance because the narrative centers Black womanhood and highlights the triple jeopardy of sexism, racism, and homophobia that was, and continues to be, the reality for many Black women. It was published through Naiad Press, founded in 1973 as the first large-scale, popular lesbian press that produced almost exclusively lesbian genre fiction that was mostly romance (Barot 393). Through Naiad

Press, Shockley also published *The Black and White Of It* in 1980, a collection of short stories about interracial lesbian relationships, and *Say Jesus and Come To Me* in 1987, a Black lesbian romance about a female evangelist and a famous blues singer. The novel is noteworthy as it is an intra-racial look at homophobia in the Black Church. Shockley's work foregrounds the early exploration of pleasurable sexuality and agency by Black women writers of romance. It is the standard by which I examine Weatherspoon's *Beards and Bondage* series.

The noted start of contemporary Black Romance history is in 1980 with the publication of *Entwined Destinies* by journalist Elsie B. Washington, writing under the pseudonym of Rosalind Welles. Dell Candlelight, under the leadership of African American editor Vivian Stephens, published the novel as part of a new program that was designed to reach an audience of readers with various ethnic backgrounds. It was introduced by Dell as the "first ethnic Candlelight Romance" (Dell) and described by *People Magazine* as the "desegregation of the paperback romance novel" ("Paperback Talk"). Unlike *Loving Her*, however, *Entwined Destinies* depicted the Black middle class and centered a heterosexual romance between same race characters.

In 1982, Dell published *The Tender Mending* by Lia Sanders, again with Stephens as the editor. Lia Sanders is a pseudonym for two writers, Angela Jackson and Sandra Jackson-Opoku. Both women started writing romance because of a desire to see heroines that reflected their African American heritage instead of the traditional blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white heroines. "There's no reason why Black women can't enjoy a light, fresh love story – something with a little of the sweetness of life and something that makes you smile a little bit that still be politically correct," said Angela Jackson in a 1982 interview for *Black Enterprise* (Bray 72). Harlequin published its first African American romance novel, *Adam and Eva* by Sandra Kitt, in 1985, again with Stephens at the helm. Almost 10 years later, the mainstream market finally saw significant growth in the Black Romance genre with the launch of Pinnacle Books' Arabesque line of Black romances in 1994. The summer of 1994 is noted as the birth of the African American romance novel because of the number of Black writers signed to publishing houses in that year (Bradley 34). Sandra Kitt, the author that launched the line with her novel *Serenade*, explained the importance of it for African American writers: "Once Arabesque came along, if you were an African American writing fiction, you knew you could submit work to them. Our work had a home" (Patrick 46-47).

Like the history of queer romance, self-publishing and the establishment of independent presses is at the heart of Black Romance history. Before Pinnacle Books, independent, Black-owned publishing companies were already offering Black readers representations of Black love. In 1990, for example, Leticia Peoples established her Maryland-based publishing company Odyssey Books, where many Black Romance authors got their start in the industry. Genesis Press, founded in 1994, was dedicated to African American romance as well as multicultural romance. Self-publishing continues to be a proven avenue for Black authors in reaching a Black readership. It also allows writers the freedom to explore diverse storylines that disrupt the traditional narratives of genre romance that are maintained by the industry's gatekeepers. Zane, an African American author of Black erotic fiction, turned to self-publishing in the 1990s to tell stories that explicitly expressed and centered Black female sexuality. Traditional mainstream publishers at the time claimed that there was not a market for such novels, yet the author set a precedent in her marketing and branding of a subgenre that indeed had a dedicated

following of Black readers. Self-publishing in romance fiction allows room for a full range of stories that explore Black women's experiences and is crucial to making visible the love relationships among communities that have been historically overlooked and undervalued in the genre. These works, such as several of Weatherspoon's novels, are deserving of more scholarly attention.

Moving Toward a Black Feminist Criticism

Examining Black Romance through a Black feminist lens considers the genre in relation to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. Racial uplift is a theme of early romances, as Black authors wrote back against the racist stereotypes of white dominant ideology, particularly regarding media images of Black masculinity. Although Black women were the authors of Black love stories, positive representations of Black masculinity were the focal points of these novels. I contend that early Black Romance novels, despite their depictions of strong and successful women, are a part of a discourse of deference, defined by Black feminist scholar Ann DuCille as "a nationalistic, masculinist ideology of uplift that demands female deference in the cause of empowering the race by elevating its men" (65).

Black authors of early romances created stories that offset negative media images of Black men. Arabesque author Gwynne Forster explained her motivation for crafting ideal Black male characters:

> Contemporary romances, on the whole, provide the reader with men we feel are desirable. The men are educated, dependable, reliable, generous, and good family men. The man treasures his woman. He cherishes her. She gives him, in return, his manhood. He's there for her. Our men are loving, upstanding, and take care of their families. If they didn't, our race wouldn't survive. Our romances reinforce that view (Fleming 260-261).

Forster's statement fits the guidelines of the romance genre, as a large part of the fantasy is the imagining of an ideal partner. While I acknowledge this fact, I believe it is just as important to also analyze the constructions and representations of masculinities in heterosexual romances. Countering negative images of Black men in popular media is vital, but it is equally important to understand the intra-racial sexual politics of Black communities. Along with these idealized fantasies of good Black men in romance, I would like to see discussions and criticism that focus on the complexities and truths of Black love relationships without that examination being condemned as Black male bashing.

To put into context the early history of when Black genre romance gained popularity, the 1980s and 1990s were eras when controlling images of Black women were abundant in the media. Black feminism was brought into the mainstream in response to the hearings of Anita Hill against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas for allegations of sexual harassment. Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Naylor were publishing fiction, poetry, and plays about love and sexuality from a Black woman's point of view. Their work received both acclaim and critical controversy because they drew attention to the abuse that Black women have

suffered at the hands of men, Black and white. This feminist perspective sparked a gender war and was the object of Black male resentment. Black male critics claimed that Black women novelists celebrated Black female protagonists as sympathetic heroines while using white dominant ideology to stereotype the ghetto culture of the Black macho male (Weisser 151). Black male writers wanted Black women to write past the sexism of Black men for the sake of the race (DuCille 62).

Black male critics had the same criticism for Shockley's *Loving Her*, as is seen in a 1975 review of the novel from the magazine *Black World* (Phillips 90). A Black male critic called the novel, "a shabby example of the author's craft." He writes: "She should know better. This mere proselytizing. It is so easy to see where Miss Shockley's sympathies lie that reading *Loving Her* is like listening to a speaker whom you believe to be lying, whose words are insistent drizzle." He calls the novel an absurdity for its poor portrayal of the Black male protagonist, condemning Shockley for feeding off negative stereotypes of Black men. His final remarks, after voicing his disapproval of the number of "white lovers that populate the Black imagination" are "[t]his bullshit should not be encouraged" (Phillips 90).

This review points to why a Black feminist criticism is crucial to Black women's writing. Shockley herself points out this fact and relates it to the lack of visibility of Black feminist and lesbian writers in print at the time. In an essay titled "The Black Lesbian in American Literature, An Overview," published in the 1979 Black women's issue of *Conditions*, she writes:

> Black male reviewers tend to scorn books with lesbian themes citing them as 'sick.' Black female heterosexual reviewers who could be sensitive to these works are usually too afraid of their peers to give them any kind of positive review; they are frightened of being tagged a closet lesbian, or a traitor to the Black male (141-142).

As a result, Shockley concludes, Black female heterosexual reviewers reinforce the status quo, joining men with all-around negative views of Black lesbian literature or electing not to review the work at all (142). She references Barbara Smith's call for a Black feminist criticism in that the basic intentions of the writer need to be considered for a book to be understood. Smith writes,

> A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists, we will not even know what these writers mean (27-28).

To that effect, I examine Weatherspoon's work in relation to those politics of race, gender, and sex.

Beards, Bondage, and Sexual Politics

The *Beards and Bondage* series includes the novels *Haven*, *Sanctuary*, and *Harbor*. Each novel centers a Black female protagonist that exemplifies the gender identity of the Strong Black Woman – a woman that internalizes her emotions and her vulnerabilities, appearing resilient in spite of the many oppressions linked to her race, gender, and sexuality. In each romance, Weatherspoon pairs trauma and pleasure in the storyline to not only reflect lived and shared experiences of her Black protagonists, but to articulate the role pleasure plays in processing trauma. Through alternating first-person narration between the main male and female characters, readers are witness to the Black female interiority – the "broad range of feelings, desires, yearning (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by a 'politics of silence' in Black female communities" (Morgan 37). This view of the protagonist's interiority benefits the study of exploration, pleasure, and agency because it gives the reader access to the spaces behind the barriers that she, in her role as the Strong Black Woman, has built for self-preservation in public spaces. Lastly, each romance in the series explores BDSM, a variety of erotic practices and roleplaying that involve bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism.

Haven, the first book in the series, is an interracial romance between a Black woman, Claudia, and a white man, Shep. During a camping trip in a Northern California mountain town, Claudia's brother, Miles, is murdered. In Claudia's escape from the murderer, Shep aids in her rescue by shooting and killing her attacker. The aftermath and tragedy of the experience link the protagonists, and they find solace in an intense and passionate emotional and sexual relationship. Both protagonists want closure after this traumatic experience. When Claudia asks about the type of closure Shep needs, the reader is a witness to the thoughts he is not ready to say aloud about his need to dominate Claudia. He thinks:

> *You. Seeing you, touching you, claiming you in a very specific way*, I want to say, but I can't. I know the tricks my mind is playing on me. The months of thinking about her molded her into someone I know she isn't. A figment of my imagination. If I can just dominate that person one time, the person in my mind, bring her to the peak, break her and bring her back down safely, I know we'll both exorcise the demons that keep me up at night (*Haven* 72-73, italics in original).

When Claudia discovers Shep's sexual coping mechanism, she proposes to be his submissive for one week because she is curious about BDSM and because her preference for "rough sex" was unfulfilled by her ex-boyfriend after her traumatic ordeal. While Claudia's sexual preferences lean towards the practice of sadism – spanking, choking, and bondage – Shep makes sure to clarify that while he will fulfill her sexual requests, submission is different. He explains that his goal is to earn her trust. He tells her: "I want you to know that I will never hurt you. As rough as we get, I will always take care of you" (96).

Claudia, in turn, confides to him what she needs in their Dominant/submissive relationship to help her heal her trauma and find closure. Her request is very similar to Shep's:

> I want you to hurt me. I want you to degrade me. I want you to turn me into a nothing little slut and then build me back up again. I want to feel something that isn't this for as long as possible. I need something to break. I need something in me to finally shatter. I couldn't get myself there at home and everyone around me was all about pushing me forward, but you can give me this. I know you can (*Haven* 139).

Ultimately, *Haven* reflects Claudia's exploration of her sexuality in relation to grief and loss. Referring to Hammond's call for a politics of articulation in Black women's sexuality, Claudia's request to be hurt, degraded, and broken is about sexual exploration and healing, particularly in response to the trauma and violence she experienced with the murder of her brother. Despite this, however, I am apprehensive about the depiction of BDSM in an interracial romance where a white man is dominating a Black woman. White men have historically used sexual violence to hurt, degrade, and break Black women, so why would Claudia willingly enter such a relationship that is uncomfortably reminiscent of that history? If Weatherspoon's mission is to humanize Black women in her storytelling, why would she, a Black woman herself, invoke such triggering imagery?

While Weatherspoon does not provide a discussion about the racial dynamics between her characters, she does create a relationship that is built on radical consent and open communication through the practice of BDSM. Claudia and Shep lay out their expectations and their boundaries before any elements of submission are practiced. In the aftercare of each sexual scene, Shep is there to support Claudia emotionally and physically, giving her the space to talk through the emotions and sensations she experiences. This act of caring humanizes Claudia, a Black woman, who is typically seen as resilient, strong, and undeserving of the same protections as white women.

Claudia, through her time with Shep, moves beyond the gender identity of the Strong Black Woman and allows her vulnerabilities to surface because of the trust she establishes with her partner. Although the exploration of submission plays a large role in *Haven*, the romantic fantasy of this novel is not necessarily the relationship that develops between the main characters but the representation of a strong support network that prioritizes Claudia's mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Love does not conquer all in this romance. The prize at the end of the novel is not the hero but Claudia's ability to process her trauma and loss and learn how to thrive despite them (*Haven* 247).

Weatherspoon explores Black femininity in *Sanctuary*, the second novel in the series, which centers the protagonists Liz and Silas. Like *Haven*, the novel is an interracial romance. Silas is biracial, of Scottish and Polynesian heritage. Liz, a lawyer in New York City, fends off an attacker in her home who is hired to kill her by a disgruntled client of her law firm. Neither the police nor the district attorney believes that her life is in danger and invalidate her request for protection. As a solution, Silas agrees to offer Liz the safety of his farm until the threat on her life is over.

There are several instances after her attack in which men comment about how her large body frame made her an equal match to her male attacker. Liz explains that "more than one person insinuated it wasn't a big deal that a guy told me he was going to kill me

with his bare hands because I'm apparently big enough to fight a dude. Like it wasn't a big deal that I was attacked 'cause I'm some corn-fed she-beast" (*Sanctuary* 171). Throughout history, Black women have been judged by the controlling images that mark us as aggressive, hypersexual, emasculating, and ultimately, unfeminine by society's standards. These controlling images, explains Collins, are "distorted renderings of those aspects of our behavior that threaten existing power arrangements" (*Black Feminist Thought* 107). They are reinforced in Black and white institutions alike. Black women are portrayed as the Other, outsiders that threaten the moral and social order, thereby reinforcing the notion that we are unworthy of protection and respect. Much of this ideology attributes to the formation of the Strong Black Woman identity that the Black women in Weatherspoon's novels embody.

Liz is aware of how her body, her voice, and her actions affect how she is perceived by white society, as shown by her interaction with the district attorney handling her case. Although she fears for her life, Liz knows that it is necessary to control her emotions in the presence of a white woman in authority. She stays calm and carefully controls her voice so as not to fall into the white perceptions of her blackness. Again, the reader is a witness to the protagonist's interiority:

> I remember women like me can't scream at women like her. I can't grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she listens. I need to cooperate. I need her on my side. I'm already in the negative with her. My build, my skin, – shit, even my voice…I've already been hysterical…the next step paints me as someone who overreacts, the step beyond that means I'm unreasonable, then hostile and then I'm the one getting arrested (*Sanctuary* 35).

Weatherspoon's description of Liz's ordeal is the reality of Black women. The contempt shown in response to a Black woman's claim of danger, threat, even pain, undermines Black women's claim to humanity. It reflects the intersection of blackness and womanhood – the double bind of white supremacy and patriarchy where Black women's voices are constantly suppressed. Brittney Cooper writes that caring for Black women's actual lives means sitting with the acuteness of our fragility and understanding that we break too (102). She writes that,

> [Black women] know what it means to face horrific violence and trauma from both our communities and nation-state and carry on anyway…We get heartbroken, our feelings get stepped on, our dreams get crushed. We get angry, and we express that anger. We know what it means to feel invisible (3).

This statement reinforces the value of interracial and Black Romance novels where Black women's care is a priority.

In *Harbor*, Weatherspoon, in her depiction of two Black men in a committed love relationship, makes room for a discussion about Black masculinities in relation to Black feminism that moves toward what Patricia Hill Collins describes as a progressive Black sexual politics that redefines Black gender ideology. This ideology allows Black men and

women to explore contemporary relationships with one another outside of the perceptions that are influenced by mass media images of Black masculinity and Black femininity (*Black Sexual Politics* 255). *Harbor* depicts a polyamorous relationship among Vaughn, Shaw, and Brooklyn. The storyline has similar elements to the other novels in the series, wherein a murder is the catalyst for the characters to form an emotional relationship to cope with their trauma. The novel begins with the murders of Corrine, a partner in Vaughn and Shaw's polyamorous relationship, and Joshua, Brooklyn's fiancé. Corrine and Joshua, as the main characters discover, were having an affair. Brook, Vaughn, and Shaw form an unlikely alliance in their grief and betrayal that soon transitions to a sexual relationship. New to polyamorous relationships and BDSM, Brook must learn to trust her two partners, despite the recent betrayal by her fiancé, and learn how to submit to Shaw, the Dominant in the threesome.

Vaughn is a lawyer who is described as a "walking heart" (*Harbor* 63) – a man full of love that easily earns his credibility as a desirable Black Romance hero. He is emotionally supportive, cognizant of his partners' needs, and in touch with his feelings and vulnerabilities. Because he knows his decisive demeanor can be intimidating to others, he allows Shaw to take the lead. He explains to Brook that his decisiveness turns people off and that Shaw, despite his intensity, has more control acting on how he feels. For example, Vaughn does not hold back his feelings and attraction for Brook. "I can see myself loving you very easily," he tells her (104). When Brook admits that she has never really been loved, Vaughn holds back his response so as not to overwhelm her with his desire to love her: "I want to say to her, *Let me love you Brooklyn. I have this here for you. Let me give it until you can't stand it anymore*" (105, italics in original). Weatherspoon's depiction of Vaughn breaks with the archetype of Black masculinity that condemns intimacy, honesty, emotional maturity, and the open exploration of pleasurable sexuality by Black men. Vaughn is comfortable in his sexuality and is fluid in his desire and sexual exploration. Being a switch in his relationship with Shaw, he alternates between being a submissive and dominating.

Shaw is a carpenter and described by Weatherspoon as "the jerk who makes custom furniture" (Moody-Freeman 6). This impression of Shaw is apparent during his and Vaughn's first meeting together with Brook. He is angry, cold, distant, and slightly aggressive in his initial interactions with her, but he quickly transforms into an emotionally supportive person after recognizing her need for comfort. He empathizes with her and offers her the simple intimacy of companionable silence and cuddling – what Brook calls "reliable human contact that's not asking me to put on a brave face" (*Harbor* 47).

Although Shaw has a caring side, he is aggressive and impatient, especially in his attempt to protect Vaughn from unrequited love. He is not as gentle with Brook as Vaughn is and in many instances in the novel, it is necessary for Vaughn to explain to Shaw how to empathize with a Black woman. My first impression of Shaw is that he models the characteristics of prevailing Black gender ideology, where his masculinity is defined by his dominance over women, Brook, and his queer partner, Vaughn. His masculinity is fragile because of its dependence upon subordination. Although his relationship with Vaughn seems strong, he has issues connecting with Brook because of the stipulations she sets for intimate love relationships. Brook wants trust and honesty, something that Shaw is not yet ready to give.

During the first weekend that Brook spends with the two men, Brook and Shaw have a disagreement about her potential commitment to a polyamorous relationship. Because she is still working through her fiancé's betrayal, she does not yet trust Vaughn and Shaw enough to enter into a relationship with them. Shaw is impatient with her insecurities in love and relationships and bluntly tells her to get over her fears. Vaughn scolds Shaw for not understanding that, in fact, they both need to prove themselves worthy of Brook's love and trust. He says to Shaw:

> On what planet do you think it's cool for us to ask any woman, any person, to take the two of us on and for us *not* to show them that they can trust us? Yeah, Corrine cheated, but you have to see how much Josh hurt her. She was days away from walking down the aisle. He embarrassed her in ways neither of us can understand because we're men…
>
> What you and Corrine and I had wasn't a secret, but we weren't out there, Shaw. She was ready to become part of his family. Everyone in her life knew about it. On top of that, she's a plus-size Black woman. How many times a day do you think she's getting some messaging that she's undesirable…She can be confident, but she's a fucking human. So, I think it makes sense that if we want her to be with us in any long-term way, we prove to her that we aren't using her and that her needs and her very real fears are being met (*Harbor* 136).

Weatherspoon's depiction of Vaughn is like a soothing balm that calms my skepticism of Black love and Black men as romance heroes. This simple act of empathy from a Black male protagonist fulfills my need, as a reader, to vicariously experience the freedom of being vulnerable and fragile as a Black woman. A capable partner is in Brook's corner, and that partner acknowledges her fears and needs and makes an active attempt at informing another Black man about how Black women should be treated. At times, it seems that Weatherspoon plays Vaughn and Shaw against each other. While Vaughn is the ideal romance hero, Shaw is a work in progress – a Black man who is constantly stumbling over his words and actions and trying to make sense of what it means to be an adequate partner to a Black woman who desires a man that is more-than-adequate.

Cooper explains that the discourse of Black intimacy is often about the ways that Black women need to love themselves instead of about Black men's "oozing wounds of self-hatred and low self-esteem" (242). Shaw's insistence that Brook get over her fear of betrayal correlates with this discourse, putting the onus of a successful relationship on Brook's shoulders. Collins notes that "[a]ny man who doesn't truly love himself is incapable of loving [Black women] in the healthy way we need to be loved" (*Black Sexual Politics* 258). She explains that moving toward more affirming love relationships, and breaking prevailing ideas of Black masculinity, must involve honesty, as love without respect is lethal and at the heart of any dysfunctional, abusive relationship (*Black Sexual Politics* 256). As is Weatherspoon's signature style, open and honest communication is central to *Harbor's* storyline. Shaw admits to Brook that he uses Vaughn as his emotional translator so that he can comfortably distance himself from potential heartbreak. With Brook's support, he knocks down his emotional barriers. His ability to communicate his feelings earns Brook's trust and, in turn, allows her to comfort him.

Harbor's depictions of Black masculinity reshape Black Romance, not because of its portrayal of a polyamorous relationship among Black characters, but because of its representation of the type of partnership that is reflected in the Black feminist scholarship of both Cooper and Collins. Cooper states that a partnership, and all the practices that are necessary to achieve it, disrupt the social hierarchies that currently structure Black intimacy, explaining that:

> Partnership demands that we meet each other on equal footing. Partnership stops placing the entire onus on Black men to profess, protect and provide. That's too much weight to carry. We all need someone to speak up for us, to look out for us, and to share resources to help us make it. We bring all our strengths and weaknesses to the table. We agree that no matter what, we ride for each other. We decide that we are coconspirators in a project of Black love. We agree to do the work we need to do to be together. We center a justice practice as a love language. We commit to being intimately and relationally just with one another (243).

This idea of partnership in Black Romance breaks with any attempt to build love relationships on the foundation of traditional gender ideology that is modeled in whiteness (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 259). A problematic Black gender ideology that is coupled with an unattainable white hegemonic gender ideology leaves (heterosexual) Black men and women struggling to develop honest affirming love relationships (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 258). *Harbor* proves that attempting to fit Black Romance into the traditional structure of a genre that is founded in white supremacy does a disservice to Black men and women because of the politics of race, gender, and sexuality that have a profound effect on intimacy and love relationships.

Collins writes that "contemporary intimate love relationships are influenced by a convergence of factors that collectively shape each individual's lived realities as well as his or her perceptions of what is possible and desirable" (*Black Sexual Politics* 249). While love may appear to come from nowhere, it is profoundly affected by political, economic, and social conditions. Therefore, I disagree with the concept of the universality of love that the genre of popular romance widely promotes. The documented history of the romance genre disproves this assumption in that it is founded on the representation of one type of love between white, heterosexual, non-disabled, cis-gender men and women that fit the ideal conventions of masculinity and femininity. These ideal couples aim to fulfill the requirements of patriarchal marriage and not necessarily the type of partnership described by Cooper.

My research into Black Romance history has reinforced for me the idea that representation and visibility is not always the key to an inclusive history (or genre) when that history is shaped by a white, patriarchal structure. The politicized history of Black love does not fit into that structure, therefore, for Black Romance novels to be representative of Black love relationships, they need to break the conventional standards of the genre. As Weatherspoon models in *Harbor*, a progressive Black sexual politics changes the shape of Black Romance in that Black women are not the only central characters in the storyline. The needs and desires of Black men, as they work through the legacy of prevailing Black

gender ideology, are also central to the love story, as a partnership is reciprocal and dependent on honesty and open communication.

In conclusion, Weatherspoon's *Beards and Bondage* series is grounded in Black feminist politics. In *Harbor*, Weatherspoon reshapes Black Romance through her representation of a polyamorous relationship that sees Black men and women as partners in Black love. Her examination of Black masculinity holds Black men accountable for their role in establishing love relationships founded in honesty and that rebuff prevailing gender ideology predicated on female subordination. In *Sanctuary*, Weatherspoon portrays the realistic depiction of how race and gender intersect and how centering Black women's lived experiences emphasize that complexity and further complicate expressions of vulnerability. Finally, in *Haven*, we see sexual exploration in relation to trauma, along with the value of a support system that allows Black women to move beyond the gender identity of the Strong Black Woman.

At the center of each of Weatherspoon's novels are Black women who find partners who care and empathize with the plights of women who are deemed unlovable in a racist and sexist society. Weatherspoon fulfills her goal in creating representations of Black women as full human beings worthy of care, defense, and protection. I encourage Black feminist scholars to continue study of the author's work, as her *Fit* and *Loose Ends* series, like *Beards and Bondage*, center Black women and women of color and explore the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Contemporary Black and interracial romance deserve a Black feminist criticism that considers the basic intentions of the writer so that readers can better understand their relationship with the genre, particularly as it concerns the articulation of Black women's desire and pleasure.

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