

Response to Eric Selinger’s “Cant and Canonicity”

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“Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested.”

Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at the University of Michigan, October 7, 1988: 132.

I resist the impulse to canon build, and I have drawn on Toni Morrison’s essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” written over three decades ago, in my epigraph to emphasize my point. Now, I am well aware that by drawing on Toni Morrison’s 1988 speech, I am invoking several well-known literary canons within which Morrison can be placed, including American literature, African American literature, and Black women’s literature. I also could have chosen to critique canon building using *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* by Martin Bernal, whom she invokes in her speech, or any number of other scholars. However, as a Black feminist and Black cultural studies critic, I consciously chose to center a Black woman writer whose lecture challenged the American literary canon’s exclusion of “Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian-American, or Native American” (124). Like Morrison, I am a Black scholar who wants to unsettle the impulse toward canon building. I’ll outline my critique and own modest proposal, but I also want you to understand my positionality and the disciplinary methodologies undergirding my response.

I am first and foremost a reader of many subgenres of romance by queer and straight writers who classify themselves as Black, Latinx, Asian, interracial, and white. I am

also a teacher and scholar of romance whose work is influenced by Black feminist and cultural studies frameworks. These shape any reading, teaching, and research of romance fiction and scholarship. As a cultural studies scholar, understanding production and political economy is crucial to my teaching and publication. I can't discuss building a romance canon because "white supremacist heteropatriarchal" institutions, to use bell hooks' words, including traditional romance publishing houses, distribution companies, popular media outlets, and even the Romance Writers of America organization, have been gatekeepers that marginalized straight and queer BIPOC writers.

Building a canon can sometimes presuppose an industry free from racism, sexism, and homophobia. For this reason, a discussion of canons without a discussion about production and political economy runs the risk of replicating industry practices that exclude diverse voices. I cannot emphasize enough that a study of the history of the romance industry and organizations reveals that straight and queer Black writers and writers of color have been marginalized. Understanding this history is crucial to understanding the danger we run in developing the criteria for building a canon based on validation by organizations that historically have not been inclusive. Black writers, particularly through their own narratives, reveal that in the 1980s publishing companies did not want to publish love stories with Black characters. To be published, their characters had to be white. For example, in one of my interviews with Black writers for the Black Romance Podcast, Brenda Jackson talked about her experience when trying to publish her Madaris book series in the late 1980s. She stated that she thought her challenge was getting her five-book series published, but according to her, race was the determining factor:

As long as I can get one book [published], long as they know there are two others already written, it's a five-book series. So I thought that would be my hurdle, but it wasn't my hurdle. My hurdle was the characters were Black. That was the hurdle. If we, you know—and I'm sure a lot of publishers right now will not tell you some of the things they said to Black authors during that time that was very discouraging to us.

Jackson notes that publishers in the late 1980s specifically told her that they would publish her novel if she would make her characters white:

I've had one that told me, 'We love your book. We love the story. If you were to make Justin and Lorren white, we will buy it.' And I'm like, but they aren't white. They're Black, you know, and I just couldn't see, you know, and I was working in corporate America—I had a good job making good money, and I'm like, no. I don't need the money that bad that I'm going to change my characters. And there were writers out there that were writing as Black, but all their stories [...] was white, you know, and they name some of them and say, 'They're Black. They're writing white stories.' But I'm like, but I don't want to do that. So several publishers turned me down for that reason. And that was very disappointing.

Jackson's story was not an isolated case. Rochelle Alers, another Black writer, also discussed holding onto her novel *Hideaway* for a decade before it was published by

Kensington in 1995 because publishers didn't want books with Black characters. In her interview with me, she stated, "I finished it [*Hideaway*] in 1985. The fact that I finished a novel, which to me was an accomplishment, because I didn't think I could do it. I didn't send it in because publishers weren't accepting manuscripts with the hero and heroine with people of color." Alers also recounted how her agent proposed a way to circumvent the industry's practice of not publishing romance novels with Black characters:

I was asking this woman to represent me because a lot of the publishing houses at that time were asking for an agent to work, and she read *Hideaway*. It had another title at the time. The title was *Candidate for Love*, and she told me, "I think I can sell this if you make your characters white." And she says, "We won't let anybody know that you are not white. And I said, "How can I deny who I am and what I am?"

The agent's solution to getting this Black writer's work published was to change her characters from Black to white and not disclose that she was a Black writer. The examples noted about Jackson's and Alers' experiences are only two of the many ways industry practices shape the production of romance and which in turn can shape what is published, how books are distributed, what's available to read, and what we produce in scholarly research and teach.

Without understanding this history, researchers and young scholars building bibliographies for a popular romance canon may include few to no BIPOC romance writers or scholarly works by and about them. In the pursuit of a canon, they might run the risk of missing how gatekeeping by publishers might skew the results of lists.

I want to return to Morrison's quote in the epigraph to my essay, because it helps to remind us about the lack of objectivity involved in canon building:

Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested.

Morrison's words "*all* of the interests are vested" highlight the politically charged field of canon building. "Vested" speaks of ownership, stakes, and possession for some type of personal result or accomplishment. For some reason, I cannot help thinking about the economic dimensions of vesting, through pension plans and stocks, where you get to take what you own even if you are laid off or leave a company. When we think about Morrison's words from this financial context, the stakes get higher. People's pensions, life savings, stocks are things that have dangerous consequences if mismanaged. Therefore, all sorts of policies and conditions are set up to minimize mismanagement. Nevertheless, mismanagement happens at all levels. Stocks crash; companies go bankrupt and abscond with people's life savings. On the other hand, conditions and policies see to it that other vested pensioners, stockholders, and companies reap the benefits of their investments. I'm not trying to be reductive with the comparison of canon building to pensions and stocks, but for me looking at Morrison's selection of the words "interests are vested" in the context of the financial emphasizes the important stakes in canon building. Canon builders set

preexisting conditions for the decisions they make, and none of this is objective. They set the conditions that help to determine specific results that are beneficial to them and their goals. I drew on this specific quote from Morrison, and early on in this essay, I discussed my personal and professional life in order to identify my stakes in the game. What are your stakes in the game of canon building?

My natural tendency is to want to categorize things. I've even heard the term "canon" come out of my mouth about Black romance. However, as a Black feminist teacher and scholar who does cultural studies, as a reader who enjoys Black romance, multicultural romance, romance by white writers, heterosexual, queer, erotic, Christian, paranormal, and other subgenres, I must always be self-reflective and apply intersectional analysis to what I study. I must always be self-critical and conscious of ways I am building syllabi, my reading lists, and whom I research. I don't believe in objectivity. Canons are not built objectively. How are our perspectives, disciplines, tastes in genres and tropes, and our limitations (funding, lack of access to books, lack of knowledge about Black or writers of color, curriculum needs, tenure and promotion) shaping what we read, teach, purchase for libraries, research, and write about?

Since, as Morrison argues, there is always vested interest in what we do, lists, books, syllabi, and research all need to clearly articulate their objectives and what frameworks are shaping them. Eric Selinger's essay "Cant and Canonicity," which speaks honestly and self-reflectively about how his vested interests shape his syllabi and research, reflects much of my own practices. For example, Selinger states, "a book doesn't show up on my syllabi or in my writing because I have 'done all of the reading' and determined that this is the first of its kind or the best of the best, or even the best illustration of this or that trope or subgenre. A host of other, contingent reasons put books in my sights." Selinger has, like myself and a number of teacher/scholars, chosen books for classes or research based on recommendations or the desire to read them. Selinger also discusses how his "focus is on representation" in his syllabi at times in order for his BIPOC, neurodiverse, trans, Muslim, and Jewish students to see themselves reflected in romance fiction. This absolutely reflects some of my own practices in my course on "Romance, Gender, and Race." Therefore, I agree with Selinger, who argues against "drawing conclusions about what is or is not canonical based on the relatively brief scholarly record on popular romance and the even shorter stack of syllabi."

As we think about popular romance studies and its role in shaping current and future scholarship and teaching, we have to be willing to dismantle "empire building," as Morrison argues, and empire reconstruction. This will be an uphill struggle, and we have current examples to illustrate the struggle ahead. The 2021 and ongoing bans on teaching US history about race and slavery, disguised as a challenge against critical race theory, have been or are in the process of being codified into laws in Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Idaho, and other states.[1] Therefore, for those of us in certain states who are interested in teaching diverse college curricula on romance and race, sexuality, or gender, these legislative bans may force the exclusion of books written by already marginalized romance writers. This is an ongoing sociopolitical situation that popular romance studies and *JPRS* need to monitor and begin to mobilize about, because some of our colleagues are probably already being affected. What are our stakes in this? What will be our role? For those of us who work in the service of justice and dismantling systematic oppression, we need to be clear about articulating our vested interests in this fight.

I'm arguing, let's not build canons. So then what? How do we build library collections, create syllabi, and build romance studies? I would like to see us first focus on our individual and collective motivations, missions, methods, and ethics for creating documents, scholarship, and curricula devoted to romance. I have been up front about my frameworks and about who I am because they shape whom and what I read and write about. I begin every class I teach by explaining how and why the readings were chosen, and I explain that the course and novels can be taught from many different perspectives. In my scholarship, sometimes the best check on me and a narrow vision is coediting, cowriting, and collaborations with colleagues across disciplines. For these reasons, I propose crowdsourcing syllabi as well as crowdsourcing primary and secondary sources on romance to build collections. In doing this, we can have a process where diverse groups can bring their expertise to bear on the collections and provide credit for their labor by clearly citing them. Over the years important curriculum has been produced online and using social media. Examples include the #LemonadeSyllabus, "Writing about Slavery/Teaching about Slavery" (see <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/mobilebasic>) and #CharlestonSyllabus, among others. Academics and experts in library science have collaborated on grants and built institutes that digitize their work on the internet. Oftentimes, we are so focused on the product that we forget that knowledge is being created by crossing spaces and disciplinary boundaries. Let's diversify our individual romance reading lists. Let's not build canons that from the beginning construct histories and resources that exclude. Let's build relationships where we can co-teach, co-learn, and collaborate to build a more inclusive community of writers, readers, librarians, academics, independent scholars from diverse races and ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and classes.

[1] See Adrian Florido. "Teachers Say Laws Banning Critical Race Theory Are Putting a Chill on Their Lessons." 28 May 2021, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/28/1000537206/teachers-laws-banning-critical-race-theory-are-leading-to-self-censorship>, and Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, "Why are states banning critical race theory?" July 2021, Brookings [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-stat es-banning-critical-race-theory/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/).

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