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Main Character Energy: Black Girls Getting the Love They Deserve in Elise Bryant's Young Adult Novels

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Abstract: This article focuses on Black Young Adult (YA) romance and the need for accurate representation that has become apparent across all genres, including both popular romance and young adult literature. Utilizing the works of author Elise Bryant, Black Feminist Thought, and the Black Radical Imagination, this work interrogates Blackness and Black girlhood to advance the concept that diverse stories matter and that more consideration should be given for literature that humanizes and normalizes the Black experience.

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Keywords: Black feminism, Black Feminist Thought, Black girls, Black Radical Imagination, Blackness, contemporary romance, girlhood, young adult literature

This article focuses on Black Young Adult (YA) romance, but I start by thinking about two snapshots of popular culture. Snapshot One is the rise of the term "main character energy" to refer to a character who has agency, one who takes charge of her life and prioritizes herself in a healthy and affirming way. Main characters are allowed to be flawed and are still celebrated. Black girls, conversely, exist in a world that sees race and gender before an actual person. Black girls as main characters aren't supposed to exist within romance stories; the strategic whiteness that centers white heroes and heroines means that we are mostly written as secondary characters. Black girls who *are* allowed to embody main character energy live and love loudly, boldly, and unashamedly—these are characters portrayed across media such as Laura Winslow and Myra Monkhouse in *Family Matters*, titular character Moesha Mitchell in *Moesha*, or Zoey Johnson, Jazlyn and Skylar Forster in *Grown-ish*.[1] Often, however, these main character Black girls are written as caricatures, or function as the sole representation of Black experience.[2] Lack of exposure to nuanced

images of Black girls can lead real Black girls to feel invisible (Toliver "For Black Girls" 64), isolated, less valuable, and less worthy of love and acceptance. Conversely, centering narratives that showcase Black girl characters resonating with "main character energy" creates space where Black girls can see themselves coming of age in healthy situations as multifaceted, three-dimensional characters, allowing the world at large an avenue that showcases them in their fullness and as deserving of love.

Snapshot Two is a 2023 interview with YA romance author Elise Bryant. When asked what keeps drawing her to the romance genre, Bryant responded that in her adolescent years she developed a love of reading romance stories, but there was a void for her because she never saw herself—as a Black girl—within those stories (Jones para 5). Similarly, authors L. L. McKinney and Nic Stone published op-eds in 2020 that addressed the state of publishing and its need to only publish stories that commodified Black pain, as it ignored stories that simply showed Black people existing in the mundane. Each author offers an admonishment not only to the publishing industry, but to readers in general, to seek out and demand stories that encapsulate and humanize the Black experience. As Bryant explains, "I just fill bookshelves with examples of Black love and Black joy and Black girls just getting to be girls. I'm going to keep writing them. Hopefully, they allow me to" (Jones, para 1).

As both snapshots reveal, the need for accurate representation has become apparent across all genres, including both popular romance and young adult literature. The publishing industry may be predominantly white, but it is important that all children and young adults see themselves within the pages of the literature they are reading. The call for more inclusive texts to decenter whiteness and monolingualism has been advocated in various forms over time, from scholars such as Rudine Sims Bishop, Pura Belpré, and Violet Harris to social media and grassroots organizations and movements such as #weneeddiversebooks and #ownvoices. The central idea of this combined call is that

> Literature does not just represent the world, but also constructs the world; it depicts the world not only as it is, but also as it might be. Literature, as a form of art, can help readers see the world differently or anew and thus help them envision alternatives to current or dominant beliefs and ways of living. (Hintz and Tribunella 37)

Literature should reflect the lived experiences of all people. Reading and engaging with novels that are only deemed canonical also promotes literary colonialism, as most of those texts are written by white authors where there is a racial hierarchy of white characters learning about racism as opposed to Black characters experiencing racism (Worlds and Miller 43). In this context of reading, the white experience is centered and the characters of color and their lived experiences become secondary to the dominant narrative. Young people engaging in this literature learn to normalize what Toni Morrison referred to as "white gaze"—meaning that the experience of people of color has no significance when not placed in relativity to whiteness. Moreover, as Rudine Sims Bishop asserts, "there is a difference in writing to someone and writing about someone" (6). It is thus vitally important to understand that for youth who are historically marginalized "in children's books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human [is] essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up" (Sims Bishop 9).

While both young adult literature and popular romance literature have typically been primarily white-centric, I argue for the potential of Black YA romance to disrupt this "white gaze" and "standard" ways of knowing. Using Elise Bryant's lighthearted and joyful YA romance novels *Happily Ever Afters*, *One True Loves*, and *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* in relation to Black Feminist Thought, I demonstrate how these Black YA romances showcase stages of Black girls' self-love and acceptance within societies that try to dictate what Blackness should and should not be, normalize Black families as loving, and embody the Black Radical Imagination. In doing so, I argue that Bryant's YA romance novels provide an important and generative reclamation of Black Joy.

Black Girls' Acceptance, Identity Formation, and Self-Love in Bryant's YA Romances

There are a number of Black authors who craft contemporary novels that center the romantic lives of Black girls, including Brandy Colbert, Kristina Forest, Joya Goffney, Leah Johnson, Ebony LaDelle, Liara Tamani, Nicola Yoon, Ibi Zoboi, and more. I focus on Elise Bryant's novels as examples of recent works that explore the dynamic, multifaceted portrayals of Black girls finding themselves and getting the love they deserve. Bryant's three novels are interconnected books whose main characters are known as friends and/or have a familial connection. Their focal point is the representation of Black girls engaging in Black love and joy in their various forms. As such, these stories challenge the notion of Blackness only being seen as a monolith. Following the notion that "for teens of color and for indigenous teens, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of racial and ethnic identity formation" (Hughes-Haskell 218), Bryant's novels provide breadth regarding how identity is established for Black youth during pubescence.

The basic plots of the novels are as follows: In Bryant's debut novel, *Happily Ever Afters*, readers are introduced to burgeoning romance writer Tessa Johnson. When Tessa is accepted into a creative writing program at her new arts-based high school, she develops writer's block. As she and her childhood best friend Caroline hatch a plan to overcome the block by creating romantic trope moments, Tessa soon discovers things about herself that lead her to question whether she deserves her own love story. *One True Loves*, a companion novel to the former, continues with the story of Tessa's current high school best friend Lenore Bennett. Lenore is in the summer after her senior year and is accompanying her family on a European cruise. She meets a boy named Alex and spends the cruise working through her feelings for him and her impending collegiate future. Reggie, in *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling*, is casually mentioned in the previous novels because he is the cousin of Lenore. This text is the first novel with dual point-of-view chapters from both main characters. The novel introduces gamer Reggie to new musician Delilah as they encounter each other over a series of holidays and embark on a journey of self-discovery and new love.

All three novels encompass varying stages of girls' self-love and acceptance, particularly through a Black lens. This focus is especially important when placed into the context of Black feminism and, more specifically, Black Feminist Thought (BFT). Black feminism, a movement that grew from Black women's recognition that most aspects of feminism catered to the white woman (Collins 293; Lorde 114; Henry 90; Hooks 119; James 3), provided a space in which Black women could be seen and heard, allowing them to

become catalysts for change.[3] As Patricia Hill Collins writes, "As each individual African American woman changes her ideas and actions, so does the overall shape of power itself change" (293). Black Feminist Thought, a critical social theory that grew from this movement, investigates and challenges the multiple portrayals of Black women that are represented across, art, literature, politics, and other public disciplines, discourses, and spheres. Through this discourse, Black women begin to assert their agency through the construction and analysis of their textual and visual portrayals. BFT provides a lens through which to see Black girls such as Tessa, Lenore, and Delilah not only existing in literature but *thriving* through self-acceptance of their Blackness while enjoying the innocence and frivolities of young love.

The degree to which each of Bryant's main characters is able to practice versions of self-acceptance and self-love differs within each text. In *Happily Ever Afters*, Tessa's core identity is centralized on her being a fiction writer, and specifically romance fiction. Tessa is a lover of all types of stories, yet she never sees herself—as a Black girl—in the stories. She turns to making her own narratives and initially writes fanfiction before delving into her own original romance tales. As she remarks, "It was empowering to create a world in which I was the center, the prize, the one desired" (Bryant, *Happily* 5). Unfortunately, Tessa also considers her writing of romance to be frivolous when compared to her classmates, since she "writes nothing more than silly kissing scenes and trope-y plots" (74). She is hesitant to share her work, as she thinks it will be seen as inferior, but when she denies her writing, she is denying herself and internalizing that she is not good enough. Tessa's ultimate self-love and acceptance are revealed in the fact that her stories are essentially love letters to herself and all Black girls. Her purposeful inclusion of words such as "empowering" and "desired" within her stories demonstrates her recognition of the need for young teens—especially young Black teens—to see themselves in stories where they are wanted, needed, and pursued as love interests.

Tessa's acceptance of her identity through self-love is also evident in the romantic interests she develops. Her initial crush is on Nico, the stereotypical popular yet artsy kid. Tessa sees Nico as a hero plucked out of one of her romance stories. She and her best friend Caroline formulate a plan for Tessa and Nico to fall in love in the hopes that Tessa will recover her writing inspiration. They plan to create trope moments to generate a romantic atmosphere. Tessa's idolization of Nico causes her to lose sight of the slow-burn love story happening right in front of her with her neighbor Sam. Sam is the traditional lovable dorky character. He is easygoing, accepts Tessa for who she is, and encourages her writing even when he is unaware that she is having writer's block. Sam challenges the status quo by accepting who he is and invites Tessa to do the same. In Tessa's initial choosing of Nico over Sam, she inherently dismisses her core identity, viewing herself as an outlier. Sam, however, is okay with being outside the confines of social acceptance as long as he can remain himself. As Tessa grapples with her identity formation and who she wants to be instead of whom she has become, she comes to terms with her writer's block, exclaiming, "I'm done taking up less space than I deserve. I'm done staying quiet just so I can be someone others might like. I want to like—no, love—myself" (Bryant, *Happily Ever Afters* 356). Tessa writes Black joy and liberation in her stories, but it is through her own liberation in her self-discovery that she frees herself to write again.

Lenore grapples with her identity in a different way. When first introduced in *Happily Ever Afters*, Lenore is a confident fashion designer who dabbles in various art expressions.

When her story is given center stage in *One True Loves*, however, the reader begins to see that she is considered a jack-of-all-trades but master of none. Lenore dabbles in many areas because she is trying to find herself. She picks up a hobby but drops it by the wayside when she thinks that she cannot be the best at it. Lenore internalizes this tendency to be a deficiency: "Maybe that's why I hop around so much, so I can hide that I'm average" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 165). Lenore also struggles with allowing people to see her as she truly is. In particular, she often settles for less in her romantic relationships, referring to herself as a placeholder until the guy realizes whom he really wants to be with. She hides behind a mask of aloofness and self-confidence to conceal her true emotions.

It is through her romantic interest in Alex, who works to balance acknowledging his Blackness while still embracing his Korean heritage, that Lenore begins to consider what she wants from life and to accept not knowing the next steps. Importantly, as a Black girl, Lenore illustrates what it can look like to allow Black girls the opportunity to take time to stretch their wings and to figure themselves out slowly. The exploration that leads to her self-acceptance is not quick; instead—and against a society that often expects the absolute best or the absolute worst of Black girls, with no space to be given grace to stumble and find their ways—Lenore is given time to "jump around a lot…I thrive on that spark that something brand-new brings. The excitement of the unknown, learning something new. It's hard to imagine committing to something for my whole life when I'm not even eighteen yet" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 48). It takes knowledge to know that in a world that may not accept you, you still have to find a way to coexist in it, especially for Black women/girls. To be a Black girl in society is to be both hypervisible and invisible, othered, or seen as loud or aggressive (Evans-Winters and Esposito 20; Fordham 8; Morris "Ladies" 490).

Part of Lenore's identity formation and self-acceptance is also demonstrated in her pushback against issues of adultification—a problem in which Black girls are perceived to be more adult than their white counterparts. As Monique Morris demonstrated in a study on Black girls' experiences in educational spaces, adultification and age compression can result in higher disciplinary actions and Black girls being pushed out of public school spaces (Morris "Countering" 44). This idea is evident in a conversation Lenore has with her mother on Black people, specifically Black kids, who are not afforded the innocence to make mistakes and figure life out. "Black people don't get second chances in life…and it's not right, and it shouldn't be like that. But it's reality. So we gotta be ready on the first one" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 63). Adultification bias causes Black kids to mature faster to prepare for a world that will not welcome them with any softness. Lenore pushes back against this by continuing to find things that bring her joy such as fashion and photography—things that allow her to revel in her innocence for just a little longer and develop her autonomy on her own terms.

Self-Love That Is Rooted in Black Feminisms

Delilah's struggles with self-acceptance and self-love take place on the public stage. She steps in to become the lead singer of her friends' band, but, when the band goes viral, the circulating discourse focuses on her being Black and highlights both the love and vitriol that Black girls receive when entering what is seen as a white punk rock space. Delilah responds by "[walking] through life holding everything in. Every thought that's too hard or too much. Every comment that may make someone uncomfortable or look at me differently. I push

everything deep, secure the lid, and then sand down all my edges, too, until they're smooth. Presentable" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 105). Delilah presents an issue of respectability politics within this statement. Black girls are often seen as too loud or aggressive when expressing any emotion that does not resemble docility. Delilah, like so many Black girls, is not able to practice acceptance and self-love of her identity; instead, she compartmentalizes her life in order to be more palatable and to exist beyond the confines of racial stereotypes.

Moreover, Delilah's identity is intersectional; as a biracial girl with a white father, she explains, "Because regardless of my dad, I'm not white. White people have always made that incredibly clear. My Blackness is the first thing they see…with that video…my Blackness seems to be called out in every other repost. And I see myself as Black, too. That's the box I've always checked on forms—and as a biracial person, it feels like you have to make that choice" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 210). Even though she identifies as biracial, she will always be seen as Black girl first due to systemic structures that are prevalent in society.

Delilah works to discover her own sound and voice within the band. She researches music and performances by Black punk rock artist Poly Styrene, but she is also forced to consider how her bandmates benefit from their proximity to her Black identity when they post videos of her singing and playing her guitar while suggesting they create Juneteenth social media posts and make references to *Black Girls Rock*.[4] As Delilah ponders a post, she questions, "The caption, though…I'm not sure how I feel about it. If I were a white girl, would they feel the need to point that out? If I were white, would my performance even be remarkable enough for people to care?" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 185). Delilah's interrogation of the racial dynamics of the social media post connects to the idea of Black girls being both hypervisible and invisible. This duo ideology can be seen in discourse that surrounds Black girls and Black women when they are displayed as oversexualized in music videos and media, yet also seen as disposable or dehumanized when reports of punitive disciplinary action or coverage of Black women's deaths are largely ignored or erased from conversation altogether (Cooper para 2). It is what scholar Moya Bailey refers to as misogynoir, which explores the intersection of misogyny and racism that Black women experience in society. Delilah questions whether it is her talent or her Blackness that makes her the draw that enables her band to go viral. Delilah experiences feelings of tokenization, which can be normal when being Black in excessively white spaces. Those feelings lead her to second-guessing both her identity *and* her talent as a young Black girl who loves rock music.

Delilah initiates her path to self-love when she begins taking guitar lessons with rival band member Ryan Love. Ryan challenges Delilah to figure out her "why" of doing music and suggests that Delilah let that be her motivation for moving forward, beyond her bandmates. As another person of color, Ryan relates to the dilemmas and microaggressions that Delilah has to face to be considered legitimate in the music world. In a practice session, Ryan acknowledges to Delilah that "yeah, the game's not fair, but I'm going to win regardless" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 134). Ryan becomes a sounding board and an inspiration for Delilah during her identity development. Through her music lessons and her interactions with Ryan, Delilah discovers her self-confidence and begins to take steps into becoming her more authentic self and being vocal about her wants and needs. She essentially

finds her voice and the freedom of releasing herself from the confines of her own expectations.

Although I focus on the female protagonists, it is important to note that, like Tessa, Lenore, and Delilah, Reggie also faces similar instances of coming to terms with who he is and reconciling how society's views of Blackness and the Black body impact his self-identity. Reggie loves video games, fantasy, and science fiction, but his expertise lies in being the dungeon master in his friends' weekly games of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Reggie interweaves his racialized identity into his gaming by posting anonymously on a blog about the racial stereotypes and erasures of Black and people of color that exist in the game. "It's hard enough being an anonymous Black person in this space, right? Half the people don't want me here…and the people that do like what I have to say, they expect me to be perfect, to speak for all Black people that like D&D" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 181).[5]

Though Reggie can articulate the marginalization of nerd culture, he finds it hard to be assertive when it comes to standing up to the teasing he receives from his brother Eric and Eric's friends. When Reggie meets Delilah, he creates a confident, self-assured persona that he thinks will be attractive to her. While he assumes a fictitious personality, he contends with the apprehensive behaviors he displays when interacting with his family. As Delilah's affection for him grows, so does his insecurity that she would not like him for the person he truly is. Only when his duplicity comes to light does he take stock in the confidence he was portraying, which was really a part of him all along. "I thought I needed to be perfect, the ideal. I thought I would never be enough for Delilah as I am, but in trying to deceive her, I robbed her of the chance to make her own decision. I treated her as a prize instead of as her own individual. And I was wrong, so wrong. I know that now. I'm ready to be authentic" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 384).

Each one of the characters throughout the course of their stories grapples with what society thinks Blackness should and should not look like: Tessa through her writing, Lenore through her various arts and the feelings of being too much and not enough at the same time, Delilah through her music, and Reggie through his gaming. Each teen discusses how they can be perceived as not Black enough for some people and too Black for others. Their love of self begins when they identify that the parts of themselves that they assumed society would judge them for are actually their strengths and what makes them who they are. That self-discovery and affirmation allow them to be honest with themselves and in turn create a space for them to be truly open to the love story that is happening around them.

Fostering Firm Foundations via Familial Love

Black Feminist Thought allots for multiple portrayals of Black girls, which also opens an avenue for viewing the portrayals of these young girls through a familiar lens. Across the media there have been negative and stereotypical depictions of Black families as broken, impoverished, or nonexistent (Weeks et al. 83). Not to say that there are not positive portrayals of Black families i.e. the Huxtables from *The Cosby Show*, the Hughleys, the Banks family from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the Johnsons from *Black-ish*, however, those come at the cost of idealizing the "perfect" Black family. Bryant's novels disrupt these notions by placing her characters in familial settings that are supportive and safe. The families are not

without their issues, however, they set a foundation for the main characters to grow, make mistakes, and extend their autonomy in healthy, mundane ways.

Each of Bryant's stories demonstrates strong depictions of familial love. In *Happily Ever Afters*, Tessa's younger brother, Miles, has a cognitive disability that leads his family to care for him in very specific ways. Tessa and her family do not see Miles's disability as a hindrance but work to make sure he is loved and shows up the best way he knows how. As Tessa explains, "My brother's disabilities are everything sometimes, but they're also nothing. Our relationship isn't remarkable or inspiring, like people expect. He's just my brother, and I'm just his sister" (Bryant, *Happily Ever Afters* 22). Tessa is further protective of her brother, as she is aware that a Black boy in society is not always afforded the same grace for having outbursts, mood swings, etc. Tessa's sibling love for Miles is particularly obvious in the way she and her neighbor Sam engage Miles's interests by watching videos and creating mock performances together.

In addition, Bryant uses hair to demonstrate the love and dedication that Tessa's mother feels for Tessa. Tessa's mother is white, and Tessa describes the ways her mother took time to sit with her grandmother and learned how to care for and style Black hair: "She studied my aunties and my granny when we would visit them in Georgia, taking notes and asking questions as if she was working on her thesis. And she learned to sculpt my hair into perfectly conditioned puffballs and braids…" (Bryant, *Happily Ever Afters* 35). Tessa's mother was dedicated to learning about the intricacies of styling Black hair so that her daughter would feel loved and accepted. Her mother's intentionality aided in fostering Tessa's self-love of her hair and her culture.

Tessa's mother and father work to not only understand Miles's disability, but also to work with Tessa with her anxiety issues. Their family unit is empathetic, affirming, and grounded with their love and respect for each other. The phrase "representation matters" has become a shorthand that is used to advocate for a diverse and inclusive set of texts that are accessible to all readers, but considerations have to be made for what type of stories are representative to the lived experiences of Black people, as "stories have been, and continue to be, vehicles for both racism and antiracism; for both celebrating Blackness and participating in anti-blackness" (Thomas 2). Stories that illustrate the rich history and complex dynamics of the Black family are essential to developing an inclusive, antiracist, literate society.

Sibling relationship dynamics and parental interactions are another essential part of establishing the foundation of familial love that contributes to identity development. These dynamics can either aid or hinder the main character as they journey to process their autonomy throughout the narrative. Sisters Delilah and Georgia have a tight-knit bond in *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling*. Even though Georgia is the younger sibling, she often operates as the older—Georgia has the more outgoing personality, which Delilah attributes to her love of the stage and musicals: "Usually it's the little sister that's the follower, the one trailing after and annoying and initiating, but with us it's the opposite. I've always had to hop on Georgia's train, or get run over in the process" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling*, 69). Georgia often pushes Delilah to take risks and try new things to expand not only her world but her perception of herself. Georgia is a support that aids Delilah in building her self-confidence.

Delilah's perception of her mother presents another perspective of how Black women are viewed in society, as difficult, boisterous, and aggressive (Morris 491). Delilah's parents

are divorced, and Delilah is concerned that part of the issue in the divorce was her mother's big personality. Her mother, Anita, is very jovial and teasing with the girls and her new love interest, Andre. Delilah regards Anita's interactions with Andre apprehensively, because she wonders if Andre will find her mother's personality "a little too bold, a little too much" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 73), like her father did toward the end of their marriage. Delilah's observations can be referred back to Lenore's sense of self in *One True Loves*. Both girls take into consideration societal views of Black women to evaluate the ways they show up in the world.

At first, Reggie's family bond seems to contrast the bond of the girls' stories. Reggie feels as if he must hide parts of himself from his family because they would not understand him or his interests as a Black nerd. This is especially true for his older brother, Eric. He constantly puts Reggie on the spot in front of his friends and teases him about his gaming activities. He even allows his friends to make fun and embarrass Reggie: "I know I should just brush off the joke; it's the same one Eric's always making about how I'm not really Black" (Bryant, *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* 102). Reggie often finds no solace in his home unless he conforms to what he thinks his family deems acceptable. However, when Reggie decides to open up and become vulnerable with his brother about his love life and his nerddom, he begins to discover that his brother admires him and is proud of how different he is. This recognition is vital to Reggie, as it signifies the acknowledgment and acceptance from his brother of his nerdiness as an integral part of his Blackness.

As Bryant's novels demonstrate, the portraiture of the Black family is essential within each story and goes beyond just showing a stable, happy family unit. The teens in these stories deal with acceptance of themselves, sibling miscommunications, mental health issues, disabilities, and parental disconnects. However, they do so in a way that continually normalizes Black families and regular, loving families—families that disagree and still love each other, families that are filled with annoying yet lovable, out-of-touch parents, and families that care about the wholeness of each individual member. The families depicted are not perfect, but they are constantly working toward happiness and stability. These snapshots of the characters existing within their family structure, exemplify the foundations of Black Feminist Thought. BFT in action works across these stories as an upset to the stereotypical images of Black families that are rooted in racism and classism; BFT is used to make the images appear normal.

The Burdens of Black Excellence and the Possibilities of Black Radical Imagination

One True Loves' portrayal of family is somewhat different from Bryant's other two novels and highlights Bryan's positive portrayal of the Black Radical Imagination. Its central storyline is the Bennett family's twelve-day summer vacation cruise across Europe. As the story develops, Bryant contrasts the Black middle-class family of the Bennetts with the interracial family of Lenore's love interest, Alex. The Bennetts have high aspirations for their children; as Lenore notes, "This is how my family shows love—by taking you down a few notches…Etta will probably finish all of her bachelor's coursework before she's out of middle school, and Wally was valedictorian of his high school and went to UCLA on a full ride. My academic accomplishments mean nothing compared to them. And as much as they tried not

to compare, that's always been clear in my parents' eyes too" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 35). The topic of Black excellence is the discourse that is carried through the novel. Both Lenore and Alex feel the pressures of being the best they can be. They understand they live privileged lives, but also that privilege comes with the responsibilities of Black Excellence: "There's pressure to, like, be our ancestors' wildest dreams or whatever. I love that phrase and it's inspiring, but also so goddamn intimidating" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 170).

Bryant's portrayal of Lenore reflects the burden that Black children often feel to carry on and extend the legacy of the previous generation. This is especially important when considering Black teens in educational and professional settings. Black kids often have to seem perfect, elite, or above scrutiny, which is a perception that is grounded in racism and anti-blackness (Raymundo 110; Scott 110). This racist misconception is based on the idea of Black people being inferior to white people. With this ideology in mind, Black kids often have to work twice as hard to prove they belong in spaces where they should be afforded equal opportunity.

Once that pattern of excellence has been established, the next generation feels the pressure to continue to perpetuate it, less it be seen as a fluke and that they were initially undeserving of being allotted access to seemingly white-only spaces. "My parents have excelled so far beyond the barriers their own parents faced. None of my grandparents were able to go to college…my parents, in turn, have sacrificed so much for Wally, Etta, and me. They have given us all their time and money so we could have the best futures possible, and because of that, they deserve excellence from us. We owe that to them. To be better than even they were" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 63–64). Lenore's need to overperform and exude excellence in every avenue clashes with her free-spirited attitude, whereas Alex willingly accepts the responsibility and understands that going to medical school affords him a secure future. Lenore feels the weight and pressure of the privilege and seeks to find space and time to figure herself out, but, as Lenore's father informs her, "What I need you to understand, Lenore, is that we don't have the privilege to figure things out. To float around and see where things take us…it's not a fair race for us. We have to be better or we're behind" (Bryant, *One True Loves* 62–63).

Through her relationship with her older brother, Wally, Lenore asks for the time and space that she needs to discover herself. When she discovers that Wally did not officially graduate college and questions him about why he did not tell her, Walls tells her about the panic attacks he had been having about considering law school and his need to achieve. They discuss how their grasping for the ideal of Black excellence has become a weight that neither can bear. After explaining their feelings to their parents, the Bennetts have a heart-to-heart on what is needed, and Lenore finally admits both her fears and her desire to take the time to find herself and flourish:

> "I've been scared to really commit, to give myself completely to something, only to realize I'm not the best at it. I've felt a lot of pressure to be the best…I've given up on a lot before I even had a chance to really begin. And I want to see what happens—what I choose for myself—if I let go of that pressure, those expectations…I want to see what I'm really passionate about, passionate enough to make a life doing." (Bryant, *One True Loves* 287)

In this moment of embracing self-love, Lenore embodies the Black Radical Imagination, a transformative process conceptualized by Robin D. G. Kelley, using observations from historical action, activists, and grassroots movements to posit how Black people can push through social inequities and disparities that were (and still are) prevalent. The Black Radical Imagination represents a subversive act of freedom dreaming and working toward social, economic, and political change. It works toward imagining a liberating Black future of possibilities that encompass joy and social transformation (Hill-Jarrett 2). In embracing the Black Radical Imagination, Lenore thus takes the chance that living outside the expectations of her family and society might forge a path that she never anticipated—one that could be greater than anything she would have dreamed. She becomes part of a Black Radical Imagination that envisions a liberatory future that includes Black people not just persisting through oppression but flourishing and working toward progression for the next generation. By the end of the novel, her family becomes less of a pressure and more of a soft place to land to test out her new theory, and to flourish and grow.

Conclusion: Reading Black YA Romance as a Reclamation of Black Joy

Following Black Feminist Thought, we know that the portrayal of Black love is a tool for social justice because it illustrates a freedom of living and loving that does not center the white gaze. We know that in order to combat racism and disrupt racist policies, readers should not solely rely on literature related to race and race-related issues as vehicles to discuss topics that may be deemed uncomfortable (McKinney para 7; Stone para 5; and Toliver "I Desperately" 323), or books that only center the Black experience through the lens of trauma and loss. Elise Bryant's three YA romance novels are therefore particularly important, because they provide a reclamation of Black Joy. Together, *Happily Ever Afters*, *One True Loves*, and *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* showcase the struggles and triumphs that three Black female protagonists face as they journey toward their own self-love and acceptance. They highlight positive depictions of Black families as loving and supportive, normalizing them as such. Lastly, they acknowledge the burden of Black Excellence but emphasize the possibility inherent in the Black Radical Imagination. Together, these novels provide readers with an opportunity to be immersed in and reclaim Black Joy via self-love, family, and community.

Black YA romance stories such as Bryant's are essential and often hard to come by. Black people don't often show up in fairy tales or modern stories that depict Black people getting a "happily ever after." The Ripped Bodice, a niche, independently owned romance bookstore, annually publishes a report on the State of Racial Diversity in Publishing. Listed within their current findings is that, in 2023, only 10% of the books published were by BIPOC authors and about BIPOC characters, a drop from the 12% in 2022. Included in their reports are only major traditional publishers, not taking into account independent or self-published authors and also including non-Black POC authors. However, their numbers do provide a glimpse into the publishing industry's gatekeeping and sidestepping the importance of Black stories. The earliest report is dated from 2016 and has shown that on average still more than 90% of the publishing industry promotes love stories that center white narratives. These reports only highlight what is already evident when walking into major book retailers and viewing social media: that the majority recommendations only consist of white novels. When

considering YA romance, the more prominent contemporary YA series that have lined bookshelves over the past few decades have similarly been stories that centered the love lives of white girls, such as *Sweet Valley High*, *The Baby-Sitters Club*, and *Gossip Girl*. Even in YA fantasy, texts such as *Twilight*, the *Selection* series, and *The Vampire Diaries* have portrayed young white characters as the only characters deserving of a happily ever after.

Publishing has nonetheless made some strides—though not always consistently—toward offering YA books that appeal to a broader and more diverse audience. Romance publishing juggernaut Harlequin Enterprises created Kimani Press in 2005 after acquiring smaller independent presses Arabesque, New Spirit, and Sepia from BET books ("Black Harlequin Romance" para 1). Under the umbrella of Kimani Press, which housed romance novels that were solely dedicated to the Black experience, co-existed Kimani Romance and a young adult imprint named Kimani TRU. Kimani TRU launched in 2007 and was created to amplify the coming-of-age romance stories of multicultural young adults. The imprint ran for seven years and was home to Earl Sewell's popular *Keysha and Friends* series. Additional publishing houses that centered Black YA stories in the early 2000s were Kensington Publishing, which housed Dafina Young Adult and Kensington Teen. These stories were serialized installments that featured a predominantly Black cast such as L. Divine's *Drama High* series, Ni-Ni Simone and Amir Abrams's *Hollywood High* series, the *Ni-Ni Girl Chronicles*, and *Throwback Diaries*, which were similar to the Sweet Valley franchise. There are other Black girl YA titles that were published before and after these, but I specifically highlight these as ongoing (at the time) series that featured Black girl protagonists as main characters in romance-themed narratives.

Like these titles, Bryant's novels provide a much-needed reprieve from canonical texts because they demonstrate the full humanity of Blackness and Black joy. These narratives also disrupt the hypersexualization of Black teen girls and the toxic masculinity of Black teen boys. Tessa, Lenore, and Delilah, for example, each have their own unique style, and Reggie is considerate and affirming of the people in his life. Even when the adolescent engages in flirtatious or affectionate behavior, the scenes are neither graphic nor gratuitous. They are often sweet and endearing moments of adoration. In these instances, the innocence and precociousness of young love is encapsulated in light kisses and tender touches that contrast representations of Black youth as othered or monstrous (Hines and Igeleke Penn 18), depicted as hypersexual or adultified, and seen as less innocent than their white peers. As Bryant's texts demonstrate, exploring representations of Black family, community, and adolescence in literature, through the context of love, is essential to developing the Black Radical Imagination. Black youth deserve stories that center them in their fullness and illustrate a future where they exist beyond systemic oppression and trauma. Black youth warrant the chance to be main characters, full stop.

The current young adult literary texts that are presented in classes that feature Black youth center a majority male narrative (Moskal 56; Polleck and Spence-Davis 87). These stories are important and needed, but my focus is on centering the need for more Black girls' stories, specifically within the romance genre. In a society where the marginalization of women, particularly Black women, is continuous, it is important to acknowledge the need to amplify and critique the representation and agency of young Black women in texts, including the various intersectionalities that encompass being a Black woman/girl. Black girls construct meaning over a variety of ways (arts, books, community, critical thinking, and media, etc.), and it is salient to consider these literacies when interacting with Black girls. As

scholar Patricia Hill Collins states, "Living life as Black women requires wisdom, because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions have been essential to the U.S. Black women's survival" (275).

Black-centered YA romance, then, is a chance to depict the unique experience of Black adolescence across the pages, particularly for Black girl readers. YA romance texts that feature a diverse array of characters—and specifically Black characters—can be used for what scholar Rudine Sims Bishop conceptualizes as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors," as a way for readers to visualize and engage with themselves and others in literature. In this context, literature aids readers in understanding beliefs, behaviors, and ideologies that differ from their own. Stories and storytelling are influential in opening up a world of exploration for readers as they search for their cultural identity (Seglem et al. 9; Toliver "Imagining" 2; Tulino et al. 34). Through the use of engaging, relevant literature, readers can interact and retain information that will ultimately help to develop their criticality and sociopolitical consciousness.

By engaging in various types of texts—such as Bryant's—that honor and affirm Blackness and Black girlhood, we work to advance the concept that diverse stories matter and that more consideration should be given to literature that humanizes and normalizes the Black experience. Thus, when considering the historicized models of childhood and the lack of diversity in young adult publishing, having more children's and YA literature that shows everyday, nuanced lives of Black youth in educational contexts would aid in the breakdown of racial bias and adultification in Black kids. Black teens need these spaces to exist to provide more opportunities for reading and exploring their multifaceted ways of being. To help in these explorations, I end by providing a set of suggested texts that feature Black girls/teens as main characters in their own romance stories (see table 1). As these texts and Bryant's novels demonstrate, when authors center the way Black love is conceptualized in literature and society, readers can immerse themselves in stories that are inclusive and representative of Black adolescent and familial experiences. They can begin to re-story Black love as a form of resistance, and, in doing so, they can create new spaces for liberating dreams and existence.

Table 1

Suggested Black Young Adult Romance Novels

Author and Title	**Description**
Clayton, Dhonielle et al. *Blackout: A Novel.* Quill Tree Books, 2022.	Six interwoven short stories featuring a group of Black teens finding love on a hot summer night during a citywide blackout.
Forest, Kristina. *I Wanna Be Where You Are.* Squarefish, 2020.	An aspiring dancer, Chloe, and her uninvited neighbor, Eli, embark on a road trip that leads to music, self-discovery, and possible romantic hijinks.
Goffney, Joya. *Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry.* HarperTeen, 2022	Quinn is a quintessential list maker. When her journal goes missing, she is blackmailed into facing her greatest fears.

Hibbert, Talia. *Highly Suspicious and Unfairly Cute.* Joy Revolution, 2023.	Ex–best friends Celine and Bradley are forced to work together in a survival course. As they spend more time together, they rediscover their bonds of friendship and possibly uncover something more.
Johnson, Leah. *You Should See Me in a Crown.* Push, 2020.	Liz Lighty needs funding for college, and her school's scholarship is only awarded to the prom king and queen. Liz is ready to take on the challenge until she finds herself falling for the competition, Mack, the new girl.
LaDelle, Ebony. *Love Radio.* Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2022.	Dani, an aspiring writer, meets Prince, a young DJ who gives love advice. She gives him three dates to convince her that he is worth her happily ever after.
Richardson, Rhiannon. *The Meet Cute Project.* Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2021.	Mia despises rom-coms, but unfortunately she needs a date for her sister's wedding. When Mia's friends decide that all she needs is a meet cute to help her on her way, what could go wrong?
Rigaud, Debbie. *Simone Breaks All the Rules.* Scholastic, 2022.	Simone's immigrant parents don't believe in dating unless they pick Simone's prom date. However, Simone has plans to change everything, plot her own course, and choose her own love.
Stringfield, Ravynn K. *Love Requires Chocolate*, Joy Revolution, 2024.	Whitney Curry is a theater nerd who is embarking on a semester abroad in Paris. As she works to adapt to her Parisian lifestyle, she meets a new French tutor who engages her in lessons on love.
Tamani, Liara. *All the Things We Never Knew.* Greenwillow Books, 2021.	Carli and Rex have a connection: basketball. As they prepare to navigate life beyond high school, they must endure the highs and lows of first love.
Watson, Renée. *Love Is a Revolution.* Bloomsbury YA, 2022.	Nala Robertson is comfortable in who she is, plus size and all. But when she meets Tye Brown, a local activist, she begins to embellish her actual activities. Will a few little lies keep her from a chance at love?

[1] Additional examples include Tia and Tamera in *Sister, Sister*, Penny Proud in *The Proud Family*, Dionne from *Clueless*, Lisa Turtle from *Saved by the Bell*, and Breanna Barnes in *One on One*.

[2] Even in cartoons like *The Proud Family*, obvious racial tropes exist within and around Penny Proud and Dijonay Jones. Penny is more of a model do-gooder Black girl from

a wholesome family, while Dijonay is more hypersexualized, ghetto, boy crazy, and less concerned with academics.

[3] Farah Jasmine Griffin reminds us that racial justice was central to this movement as "Black feminists have been committed to the freedom of all people, especially black people" (490).

[4] *Black Girls Rock* is tied to a platform—created by former celebrity DJ Beverly Bond—that acknowledges and awards the accomplishments and talents of Black girls and women across disciplines.

[5] *Dungeons &* Dragons is a popular fantasy-based role-playing game that allows the player to create and narrate their own adventures in a robust world filled with various humanoid and fantastical characters and creatures. *D&D* is not without critiques. Even though the game is a site for imagination and innovation, it has often been a space that is dominated by white, cis-het males who bolster oppressive structural systems within the game. Players use the game as another form of escapism, yet that fantasy can perpetuate negative stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. This can lead to feelings of displacement and otherness in *D&D* due to racial, gendered, and sexualized hetero norms that can be prescribed as a default to the game's world building (Ferguson 12401; Yesseler and Craig 464). Reggie loves the game and is able to point out the flaws that exist in a fantastical world that should be inclusive for all.

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