

## Narrating Histories of Love and Violence: The Civil War and Alyssa Cole's *A Hope Divided*

Sarah Ficke

Volume 15, Issue 1: July 2026

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

<https://doi.org/10.70138/NARS8652>

**Abstract:** What is the role of history in historical romance? Historical romance has long been one of the most popular forms of romance fiction. Its popularity has attracted scholarly attention in early critiques of the romance genre, studies of historical fiction, and stand-alone monographs. However, as Hsu-Ming Teo noted in 2012, scholars tend to focus on gender roles and representations of sexuality in historical romance while “the issues of history and historiography are never properly explored.” And yet, how romance novels represent history is important to both authors and readers alike. In this article, I examine the second novel of Alyssa Cole’s Loyal League trilogy, *A Hope Divided*, to demonstrate how Cole’s Civil War novels engage in reparative history while also providing insightful explorations of historiographical meaning-making and its long impacts on American civic life. Throughout *A Hope Divided*, Cole not only highlights aspects of the war that are often overlooked but also foregrounds the complexity of narrating such a past, especially in a way that centers characters and voices that have been systematically marginalized in the historical record.

**About the Author:** Sarah H. Ficke is a Teaching Assistant Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research and teaching interests include popular romance fiction, nineteenth-century British literature, early African-American fiction, and popular literature and culture. Her work has appeared in *Victorian Poetry*, *Studies in the Novel*, and *CEA Critic*, and the edited collections *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, and *Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories?*

**Keywords:** Alyssa Cole, historical romance fiction, historiography, American Civil War

## Introduction

Historical romance: For decades, the term has been likely to conjure up images of dashing young bucks and fashionable ladies, dukes and highlanders and innocent young heiresses, or possibly brash American merchants and Southern belles. The genre is not actually monolithic, but its public perception has been dominated by particular character types and narrative approaches oriented around the white upper class and upper-class-adjacent British and American worlds of the long nineteenth century. It is no accident that the first blockbuster TV adaptation of genre historical romance was Julia Quinn's white Regency *Bridgerton* series.[1]

Alyssa Cole invokes this predominantly white and British image of the historical romance in her author's note for *An Extraordinary Union* (published in 2017), the first book in her Loyal League trilogy, which is historical romance set during the American Civil War, noting, "The more I learned about American history, the more I saw it as the staging ground for stories just as entertaining and epic as the Regency dukes and viscounts romance readers swoon for" (257). However, it wasn't just epic storylines that drew Cole to the Civil War. As she writes, "It's still an open wound in this country—is it even history, really, when the effects of it still vibrate beneath the surface of American life?" (257). Cole's novels in this trilogy feature complex and moving romantic storylines, but those storylines don't just explore the challenges of falling in love during a war. They also explore the many ways the war—and the stories Americans tell about the war—continue to matter today.

## The American Civil War in History and Memory

The war between the Northern (Union) and Southern (Confederate) states was the culmination of decades of conflict about the role chattel slavery should play in the United States. Broadly speaking, the Southern states (economically dependent on large-scale agriculture using enslaved labor) advocated for slavery's continued existence and expansion, while the Northern states (more industrialized and reliant on paid labor) resisted any expansion of slavery into new or free territories. The total abolition of slavery was not the Union government's initial goal. However, ongoing pressure from Black and white antislavery advocates, and recognition that destroying the slave economy would be necessary to end the war, prodded President Lincoln into issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. That document, which freed enslaved people within states that were part of the Confederacy, paved the way for the abolition of slavery throughout the country at the end of the war. However, white supremacy remained a powerful popular force in both the Northern and Southern states; even those arguing for abolition did not necessarily want racial equality. As a result, the Civil War formally ended chattel slavery in the United States, but white supremacy remained and led rapidly to segregation, as well as limits placed on Black property ownership, access to education, and political power that extended from the decades after the war through the first half of the twentieth century. Recent scholars have drawn compelling connections between those oppressive laws and policies—many only changed within living memory—and the current disparities Black Americans face in health, education, political access, and "the persistence of wage employment discrimination and racial wealth inequality" (Darity and Mullen 262).

The symbols of the Confederacy have also remained popular with white supremacists, and are often embraced by perpetrators of racist violence, like Dylann Roof, who posed with a Confederate flag before murdering nine Black parishioners at the Charleston, S.C., Emanuel AME Church in 2015 (Kinnard and Collins). This persistent presence of Confederate-coded white supremacy is the “open wound” that remains from the Civil War that Cole references in her author’s note for *An Extraordinary Union*, and it exists in part because of the power of narrative, which white supremacists used to rewrite and romanticize the memory of the Civil War and the Confederacy’s motivations.

This historical romanticizing and mythologizing of the Confederacy, which emerged after the war, is called the Lost Cause narrative, and it has had an enormous influence on American civic life and popular culture. Lost Cause narratives describe the Civil War as a conflict over states’ rights, rather than slavery, and romanticize the losses of Confederate life and property while villainizing Northern soldiers. They also focus on stereotypes of compliant, “happy” enslaved people victimized by Northern abolitionists (or negative stereotypes of violent and “uncivilized” enslaved people). As Sarapin, Ledet, Morris, and Emeigh explain in their article about the impact of Lost Cause iconography on American life, “the myth of the Lost Cause is one of the first successful, long-term campaigns of disinformation in the U.S., promoting heritage over hate and states’ rights over slavery as the true motivations for war with the Union” (385). Sarapin and her co-authors argue that the Lost Cause narrative and its message of white power is normalized in daily public life by the presence of monuments and memorials to the Confederacy. These monuments were largely built long after the war was over—during the height of segregationist Jim Crow laws in the early decades of the twentieth century, and then during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s—and are frequently located in majority-Black areas (387, 386). They also note that support for the Lost Cause version of the Civil War often goes along with reluctance to teach about slavery and post-War Black political disenfranchisement in schools, which produces a significantly warped picture of American history for many students (403).

American history books aimed at schoolchildren have included divergent accounts of the war almost from the moment of its conclusion, with the pro-Confederate perspective gaining ascendancy after Reconstruction such that “by the early twentieth century, Northern textbooks had adopted mint julep Lost Cause narratives in an apparent attempt to appease Southern readers” (Bohan et al. 2). History and social studies curricula have continued to be sites of debate about Civil War history and memory, including in the years leading up to the publication of Cole’s series. In 2015, Laura Isensee reported that the Texas State Board of Education made changes to its history standards, including history of the war, and “voted to soften slavery’s role, among other controversial decisions, and these standards became the outline for publishers to sell books to the Texas market—the second-largest in the country.” Also in 2015, the textbook publisher McGraw-Hill had to issue a public statement and correction when a social media post pointed out that one of its textbooks available in Texas described enslaved Africans as merely “workers” in a section on “immigration” that did not acknowledge the forced and brutal conditions of their kidnapping or labor (Collier). Since Cole finished publishing her trilogy, white supremacist attempts to revise American history have increased. For example, in 2023 the Florida Department of Education endorsed a video that said of American slavery, “Before you judge you must ask yourself, ‘What did the culture and society of the time treat as no big deal?’” (qtd. in Cerabino).

As I am finishing this article in early 2026, America is facing a new surge of efforts to erase Black history and the contributions of Black Americans to civic life that is being compared to the post-Reconstruction era, which plunged the United States into decades of segregationist legislation and anti-Black violence (Wolf). At the same time, Lost Cause-influenced stories continue to circulate in popular culture, including in historical Christian inspirational popular romance fiction. Historian Sarah Handley-Cousins argues that these recent novels are less overtly pro-Confederate than historical Civil War romances from the 1970s to the 1990s (including those by authors like Patricia Gallagher and Heather Graham). However, they may include key Lost Cause tropes and stereotypes of enslaved people while treating “enslavement as a plot driver for white character development,” particularly the hero’s Christian awakening (164). Handley-Cousins concludes that “as plantation romances in the late nineteenth century served the architects of Lost Cause, modern inspirationals provide a cultural foundation for a worldview that refuses to acknowledge the reality of the American system of enslavement or its lasting legacies of modern structural racism and white supremacy” (167). In contrast, she writes, novels by authors like Beverly Jenkins and Alyssa Cole present nuanced, thoughtful, and deeply researched presentations of the Civil War that challenge that Lost Cause narrative.

In this article, I will discuss the many ways Alyssa Cole’s Civil War trilogy can be read as an intervention in this long history of systematic oppression and misinformation through a close examination of the second book in the series, *A Hope Divided*. Cole describes her purpose, in part, as complicating what has become for many a simplistic and misleading view of the Civil War. She writes in her author’s note at the end of *A Hope Divided* that “the pop culture narrative” of the Civil War “has been flattened into a few two-dimensional stories—Southern belles, brothers versus brothers, etc.” As she notes, this hides “a rich and varying American history” and “a more nuanced view” of the war, including the ways that the Confederacy was opposed by people within the South. Cole was working on her series in the aftermath of the Charleston Emanuel AME Church shooting when there was renewed debate over the visibility of Confederate monuments in public spaces. In the years leading up to and through the publication of *A Hope Divided* in 2017, the United States saw increasing calls to remove memorials that valorized and romanticized the Confederacy, but those efforts faced (and continue to face) serious pushback, including state laws against removing or altering these monuments (Gerhardt 3). North Carolina, the setting of *A Hope Divided*, enacted a monument-protection law in 2015 and since then has seen numerous legal challenges and protests contesting the presence of pro-Confederacy monuments on public land.[2]

## Engaging History in Historical Romance

The Loyal League trilogy is a historical romance series that is deeply invested in the representation of history. Cole clearly wants her readers to be aware of the narrative process of history-making that brought America to this point, still carrying the weight of a war that happened more than 150 years ago. History is not something that happens in the background of her romances; it is something the characters create with every choice they make and with every frame they place around their experiences. By moving her fictional characters through well-researched and complex historical moments, Cole shows her readers a new picture of the Civil War while also demonstrating how competing pictures of the war were created and shaped into narratives.

Historical romance has always had the potential to engage with the making and remaking of historical narratives, historical representation, and how we learn history, but scholarship on the genre has not always acknowledged that potential. In her 2012 essay on Bertrice Small's novel *The Kadin*, Hsu-Ming Teo noted that scholars of popular romance tend to focus on gender roles and representations of sexuality while "the issues of history and historiography are never properly explored in the historical romance novel because it is simply assumed that these novels are fantasies rather than earnest engagements of fiction—let alone literature—with history" (22). More than a decade later, that perception is changing,[3] but public discussion of historical romance still often focuses on the idea of accuracy, particularly in terms of setting, material details, and character, rather than engagement with history itself.

However, historical accuracy in romance is in many ways another fiction. As Laura Vivanco writes, historical accuracy is "sometimes invoked in order to maintain the status quo in the genre" in the face of increasing racial and socioeconomic diversity, often by critics who focus obsessively on the accuracy of historical details in romances with nonwhite protagonists while remaining silent about the implausibility of tropes established by—and common in—historical romances with white protagonists (3, 6). Piia K. Posti also notes in her 2024 article about the *Bridgerton* series that many popular and best-selling historical romances have always had a speculative element baked into the very premise: "What if the heroine could enjoy heterosexual love and all the riches and privileges of aristocratic society while also managing to bypass the constraints of patriarchy?" (138).

This speculative foundation, upon which so much of historical romance is built, is not automatically granted to Black authors and protagonists. Jeania Ree V. Moore points to a vivid illustration of this speculative element and its racialized dimensions by analyzing a panel conversation from the Tucson Festival of Books that featured Julia Quinn and groundbreaking Black historical romance author Beverly Jenkins discussing their approaches to writing historical romance. In this conversation, "Jenkins assiduously maintained her fidelity to historical accuracy, whereas fellow panelist Julia Quinn, author of the white historical romance *Bridgerton* series, did not" (14). Of course, there are factually correct historical elements in the *Bridgerton* series alongside its speculative foundation, but it is telling that Quinn does not feel compelled to focus on historical accuracy as a major selling point of her work—it is either assumed, or assumed to be unimportant. As Moore writes, "the ensuing conversation highlighted how where history ends and fantasy begins is a racially weighted and morally freighted issue, as white fantasy often warps, erases, and masquerades as history" (14). Moore goes on to demonstrate that the paratextual elements of the kind Jenkins (and Cole) include—like author's notes and bibliographies of historical sources—function as modern versions of the "truth claims" that framed many nineteenth-century Black texts and are part of a long history of "distinctively Black ... meta-historical labor" that is not demanded of white authors (14). However, as Moore and many other scholars argue, the power of historical romance is not grounded purely in accurate representations of the past, but in the connections it makes between past and present, which may be founded on, but are not limited by, existing historical records. As I'll demonstrate, Alyssa Cole places these connections at the center of her novels on the Civil War.

## ***A Hope Divided* and the (Re)Making of Civil War History**

A close examination of the second book in Alyssa Cole's Loyal League trilogy, *A Hope Divided*, demonstrates how Cole's Civil War novels engage in a reparative retelling of history (often overlooked in textbooks), while also providing insightful explorations of historiographical meaning-making and the war's long impacts on American civic life. As mentioned earlier in this article, throughout the trilogy, Cole uses her author's notes at the ends of the novels to provide contextual information for her readers about the books' connections to American history and cultural understandings of that history.

*A Hope Divided* is set in 1863 in North Carolina, a Confederate state. This novel, much like the first book in the series, delivers a healthy dose of corrective historical accuracy by showcasing the active roles that Black people (enslaved and free), Native Americans, and white Unionists in Southern states played in defeating the Confederacy. This novel is an interracial romance between a Black biracial woman and a white man, so it is distinctly different from Black romances like those by Beverly Jenkins. However, Cole's depiction of the heroine places her work in a tradition of Black women writers who "situate the black female protagonist as agent of resistance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Dandridge 1). The heroine of *A Hope Divided*, Marlie Lynch, is the daughter of a rich white planter and an enslaved woman whom the family later freed. Though Marlie was initially raised by her mother away from the Lynch plantation, Marlie's mother later sends Marlie to live at the plantation with her white relative Sarah Lynch, who has abolitionist sympathies. Marlie uses her position as a free biracial woman living at Lynchwood Plantation, her elite white family home, to operate a stop on the Underground Railroad (aided by Sarah) and covertly collect and pass on information about the Confederacy to a league of spies operated by the Union. While Marlie is gathering information at the local Confederate prison under the guise of delivering aid to Union prisoners, she forms a friendship with Ewan McCall, a white Union soldier. When Ewan is injured in an escape attempt, Marlie hides him in her rooms at Lynchwood until increased surveillance by the local Confederate Home Guard and threats against Marlie from pro-slavery members of her family force them to flee.

Cole builds the novel's action plot around the antiwar resistance movement in North Carolina's "Quaker Belt," as documented by historian William T. Auman. She locates fictional Lynchwood Plantation in Randolph County, where, Auman writes, fierce struggles took place between the Home Guard and the pro-Union resistance group the Heroes of America (also known as the Red Strings). The Heroes of America were "a secret, underground, anti-Confederate organization of militant Unionists" (Auman 39). While the Heroes of America were largely white, Auman notes that "there is some evidence that blacks, free and slave, cooperated with white militant Unionists in the operation of the Underground Railroad and in the anti-Confederate cause in general" (76). However, that evidence is limited, likely both for reasons to do with race and the group's secrecy. In an earlier article, Auman and coauthor David D. Scarboro point out that "Because the HOA operated largely in secret, there is inevitably much mystery surrounding its origins and activities, and no amount of analysis of the available evidence, much of which is flimsy and difficult to interpret, will ever answer all of the historian's questions" (328). Obviously, this is fertile ground for a historical novelist to explore, and Cole uses her book to bring to life the complex dynamics of the war in this part of central North Carolina. For instance, Cole points out the fractures Auman documented within the white population, particularly along class lines. The wife of one of the white

farmers who joined the Heroes of America in the novel observes, “Why should my boy fight so rich men can keep on living off the work of others?” (131).

Cole also imagines the roles Black and mixed-race people might have played in this day-to-day resistance, passing information along and hiding resistance fighters. Marlie’s actions are a blend of fact and fiction. For example, as a member of the Loyal League Union spy organization, Marlie receives word that “Dr. Johnson” from the Heroes of America had contacted Union officials to try to form an alliance with them, something that one of the probable founders of the group, Dr. John Lewis Johnson, did in late 1862 (Cole 72, Auman and Scarboro 337). In Cole’s reimagining of this period, Marlie is given authority to make contact with the Heroes of America on behalf of the Loyal League, which she does when the Heroes help her and Ewan flee to Tennessee after the Home Guard (led by the fictional villain Cahill) move into Lynchwood, terrorize the local community, and threaten to enslave Marlie.

The Heroes of America are one of many forgotten aspects of America’s Civil War. As Auman writes in the conclusion of his book, *Lost Cause* narratives of the Confederacy erased stories of internal Unionist rebellion: “Few citizens of the United States today have ever heard of the Heroes of America or the Red Strings or about the protracted struggle against Confederate power by those who remained loyal Americans in the Tar Heel state after secession” (214). However, this history is important. Cole points out in her author’s note for *A Hope Divided* that organizations like the Heroes of America challenge the “two-dimensional stories” of popular Civil War history that portray the Southern states as a unified, homogenous block of white nationalism instead of the complex places they were and remain today. These elements of Cole’s novel place it firmly in line with other works of reparative history, and also in the realm that author Beverly Jenkins calls “edutainment”—historical romance that blends lesser-known historical facts with the protagonists’ romantic journey (Piligian). As Jenkins says in an interview, this type of writing plays an important role for curious readers: “It’s a way to teach American history with all its warts and with all its bitterness, and there’s no test on Friday, but you learn as you read” (8). Cole’s approach to writing is her own, but her work operates in much the same way to teach her readers something new about the past while fulfilling their desire for a love story with a happy ending. However, as Jeania Ree V. Moore argues, a too-conventional understanding of edutainment can narrow interpretive options by framing the romance plot as the means to a historical end rather than an integral part of a book’s work and meaning (15).

Following Moore’s lead, I contend that the romance plot between Marlie and Ewan in *A Hope Divided* is doing more than facilitating a reader’s knowledge about the Civil War and the way marginalized communities contributed to defeating the Confederacy. Cole’s novel also asks the reader to think more carefully about how history itself—in this case, the history of marginalized people during the American Civil War—is constructed as she walks us through the incidents that mark the deepening connection between Marlie and Ewan. In fact, she represents history as something that must be understood through the give-and-take, caring, and thoughtful process that marks the evolution of a successful romantic relationship. By making this case, Cole connects historical romance with a larger tradition of reflective historical fiction.

In his book *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*, Jerome de Groot argues that historical fictions—even, or maybe especially popular ones—are significant because they “allow reflection upon the representational processes of ‘history’”. They provide a means to critique, conceptualize, engage with, and reject the processes of

representation or narrativization” (2). This kind of reflection and critique of the process of history-making is more frequently associated with works that fall into the category of historiographic metafiction, which Linda Hutcheon defined as novels that are “intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). Works by Black women that fit this category include *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams. These “liberatory narratives,” as Angelyn Mitchell names them, “reenforc[e] the idea that the presentation and representation of reality are subjective constructs and as such may reveal discourses traditionally silenced by more powerful discourses” through, among other techniques, creative intertextual engagements with writings by other Black women (12). Ana Nunes notes how Williams uses multiple focalizations and narrative perspectives in *Dessa Rose* in a way that “exposes the distortion of African American history and the cultural constructs of race [...] while opening spaces in the narrative in which the slave both claims and recreates her sense of self” (99).

These novels are part of a larger collection of works by Black novelists, especially at the end of the twentieth century, that explore complex ideas about history and the process of remembrance and forgetting through multilayered narratives about the Black American experience. These stories resist what Keith Byerman calls “the pastness of the past” and insist upon a more nuanced understanding of history and its ongoing relevance to the authors’ present moments (16). Mitchell, with a nod to Deborah McDowell, argues further that the historical novels by Black women about enslavement and its aftermath “have a civic value: they can help to emancipate their readers from the cultural and historical amnesia that has surrounded the issue of slavery in the United States” (21). Cole’s author’s notes show that she sees her work on the Civil War as inhabiting these same spaces: addressing the danger of “cultural and historical amnesia” and embracing the civic value of fiction.

As genre romance, Cole’s work is structurally and stylistically different from that of Williams, Morrison, and other authors examined by Mitchell, Nunes, and Byerson. It does not include magical realism, disorienting shifts in perspective, or time jumps to the present day, but interrogates some of the same complex issues. De Groot writes that popular forms of media that may be perceived as (or designed to be) less dense, more accessible, or more sensational than the literary works previously mentioned can also “open up discursive spaces where ideas about the past, desire, time, horror, nationhood, identity, chaos, legitimacy, and historical authority are debated” (2). Romance novels are not part of de Groot’s scope in *Remaking History* (though he does touch on them in his earlier book *The Historical Novel*), but they can function in the same way as the movies, TV dramas, and war novels he examines. Like many of those works, romance novels are meant to be absorbing; they build compelling, page-turning narratives that appeal to the reader’s senses and draw the reader into moments of physical and emotional intimacy and intensity. Alyssa Cole does this in *A Hope Divided*, where the progression of Marlie and Ewan’s love story, surrounded as it is by the violence of racism and war, opens up space for the reader to engage with questions about the construction of history, what counts as history, and what history means (or should mean) for the present, all through a framework of caring and love.

One of the key points that Cole makes about history in *A Hope Divided* is that finding the history of marginalized people may require looking in nontraditional places. This observation emerges through the story of Vivienne, Marlie’s mother. Marlie and Vivienne were close when Marlie was young, and Marlie learned herbalism from her mother.

However, when Marlie is nearly thirteen, Vivienne sends her to live with Sarah Lynch, at which point the mother and daughter start to grow apart. By the beginning of the story, Vivienne has been dead for several years and Marlie is left with only memories and a manuscript by her mother, written in Vivienne's first language, French, which Ewan helps her translate. This manuscript is part memoir, part herbalist recipe book. Cole, through the voice of the narrator, describes the manuscript in this way:

Everything Marlie had ever wanted to know about her reticent mother was inscribed on those pages, if she paid attention. Between the lines of a recipe for a salve for an aching back was the story of how Marlie's grandmother had pulled a muscle carrying a sick child on her back as she chopped sugarcane. The tisane to stop blinding headaches had been learned after Vivienne's sister had been struck in the head for talking back to the overseer. (27)

This manuscript is far from a classical treatise on history, or the professionally published scientific tomes that aid Marlie with her botanical research. Nor is it a story of enslavement and freedom written for a white audience, like so many of the famous Black-authored narratives of this period. Its value is personal and urges the importance of family history. Vivienne wrote directly to her daughter, inscribing the first page of the manuscript, "*Here, my past written, for you, my future who lives*" (27, italics in the original). Stretching from her early life in Guadeloupe to her final days in North Carolina, Vivienne's manuscript tells a story that could be found nowhere else, and its format—handwritten and combined with herbal recipes that are devalued by white Americans like Ewan—reminds the reader that privileging certain kinds of documents or knowledge over others can obscure crucial truths.

After Marlie moves into Lynchwood, she becomes acculturated into a European-oriented hierarchy of knowledge and behavior that privileges ideas and practices created by white men. The last time Vivienne saw her daughter, she said, "*you so much like them now*" (26, italics in the original). Marlie's manners, education, and fascination with European scientific texts and techniques have moved her into an in-between space where she feels "a sea of privilege separated her" from both the Black inhabitants of Lynchwood and also her white family (152). By the start of the story, she has long rejected "superstition," including the kinds of charms and hexes she learned about from her mother as a child. However, when Stephen Lynch and his racist wife, Melody, arrive at the plantation, those earlier beliefs reemerge. Marlie has long thought "the only power she had now came from the knowledge she had gained through her imported books on plants and herbs" (38), but she discovers that building resistance requires that she reconnect with her past through tangible acts like making charms: "Lessons from her past, learned or warned against at her mother's hip, had begun coming back to her, as if tying off the little red sachet had unlocked something that Marlie had hidden away beneath the science" (99). Marlie's gris-gris works, not through explicitly supernatural means, but through reawakening aspects of Marlie's identity and realigning her priorities. This enables her to find a way out of the trap Lynchwood has become.

A second, related point that Cole elaborates in this novel is that history is shaped by the person telling it, and by the form that the story takes. Cole demonstrates this through the story of Marlie's birth. Throughout her life, Marlie has been led to believe that Stephen, Lynchwood Plantation's current owner, and his sister Sarah are her siblings. However,

Marlie later learns that Stephen is her father and Sarah is her aunt. This truth, which turns Marlie's life upside down, is buried within Vivienne's manuscript, but that is not where Marlie learns it first. Instead, she hears the information from Melody, Stephen's abusive, racist, Confederacy-loving wife, who seized Ewan's translation of that part of the manuscript from Marlie's desk before Marlie had time to read it. Melody's vindictive verbal recap of Marlie's birth story characterizes Vivienne as a "whore" and Marlie as an "abomination" (157). However, this is not the only version of the story. Later, Ewan provides Marlie with his own summary of Vivienne's connection with Stephen:

"In the portion I translated, your mother stated that he seemed to be captivated by her, had shown her kindness, and they'd begun to meet in secret. She didn't discuss it in detail but in the last section I translated, she'd dreamed she was pregnant with a beautiful baby girl." (160)

Translating Vivienne's manuscript is one way Ewan demonstrates his growing affection for Marlie, and the act is depicted as a form of intimacy: "He wanted to please her ... Something throbbed in his chest at the fact that those were her mother's words, and she'd shared them with him" (120–121). Ewan's version of Marlie's birth story is untainted by Melody's hateful spin and motivated by his love for Marlie. But, crucially, it is still mediated, both by Ewan's role as translator from the original French and Vivienne's own elliptical expression of these events. Cole's method of exposing the different narrative perspectives on this one event echoes the method Sherley Anne Williams uses in *Dessa Rose*. According to scholar Ana Nunes, the way Williams juxtaposes a white man's narration of Dessa's story with Dessa's own telling "show[s] the production of the historical record in the making" and also "dramatizes the misrepresentation of African American history" through the white lens (102). However, Cole never gives her reader Vivienne's original, untranslated text of this passage, so Marlie's origin story is only available through the mediation of Melody's and Ewan's white voices.

This moment is an example of what de Groot calls "unsettling uncanniness" in the midst of an otherwise realistic text that comes from the reader's awareness that the text they're engaging with is "a narrative, incomplete, unfinished, unable to communicate anything other than a contemporary construction of an unknown, untouchable, lost, dead world" (14). This uncanniness is what encourages the reader to confront the instability of historical representation. Cole chooses to make Marlie's birth story a site of uncanniness in her novel in ways that prompt reflection about what we can and cannot know about the past, especially private lives and emotions. Considering the complex and coercive power dynamics at play in any connection between an enslaved woman and her enslaver, Marlie cannot truly know the conditions of her conception, and her mother is no longer there to ask. All she has is an interpretation of her mother's written words, colored by her memory of her mother's observation that white people "take what they want because nothing is denied to them ... But taking is different from loving" (76). At one point, Marlie fears that she was unwanted, a bitter reminder to her mother of an abusive situation. Ewan, drawing on his own interpretive skills, steers Marlie in a different direction. His sister, he tells her, was conceived through rape, but is still his mother's favorite child. Furthermore, he notes, Vivienne knew herbal methods for ending a pregnancy—the fact that she didn't suggests that she very much wanted her baby. That moment convinces Marlie that, regardless of how she

was conceived, her mother loved her. She reflects that “Not every woman in Vivienne’s situation had a choice, but she had, and she had always chosen Marlie and what was best for her” (234). Nevertheless, we are aware that Marlie’s conclusion is not a simple or obvious truth; it is the result of a process of careful thought, logical assumptions, and an act of empathetic imagination. The process that Cole traces, starting with Vivienne’s written manuscript, through Melody’s and Ewan’s competing readings of the text, and concluding with Ewan and Marlie’s interpretation of Vivienne’s words within the context of her life (as far as they can understand it), reflects the process of making history out of archival texts and fragments of memory in all of its messiness, while simultaneously arguing for the importance of continuing to wrestle with that kind of history-making instead of seeking simple and convenient “truths.”

Marlie and Ewan’s work on the translation deepens their emotional relationship, while also showcasing the varied and challenging ways the past connects with and matters to the present. Within the world of the novel, both recent and ancient history are a lens through which characters attempt to navigate their present moment. Marlie searches her own family history and her mother’s actions for clues that will help her handle her feelings for a white man. Growing up in a deeply racist slaveholding state, Marlie would have been surrounded by examples of violent and coercive encounters between white men and Black women and well aware of the systemic conditions that made an equal and consenting relationship between someone like herself and Ewan challenging, if not impossible. When Cahill, the leader of the Confederate Home Guard, threatens to sell Marlie into prostitution as a “novelty” item, she wonders, “*Is that what Maman was to Stephen?* The thought cut deeply, and was immediately followed by something even more painful. *Is that what I am to Ewan?*” (164, italics in original). These concerns, driven by Marlie’s lived experience and the history of race-based slavery in the United States, form an important part of the book’s romantic conflict, while underlining the vulnerable physical and emotional position all Black women—enslaved and nominally free—could experience in a society with race-based slavery as its foundation. These concerns also echo plots of early African American novels like *Clotel*, which often embedded tragic interracial romances within wide-ranging socio-political commentaries, a literary history that cannot be divorced from Cole’s book, though it does not determine it.

Meanwhile, Ewan has his own complicated ties to history. He has spent most of his life following the principles laid out in *The Enchiridion*, an ancient work of Stoic philosophy by Epictetus that was translated into English (among many other languages) and circulated relatively widely in Britain and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[4] *The Enchiridion* is a relatively short book featuring brief, pithy chapters about controlling one’s emotions and reactions to things outside of one’s control. As an atypical child with an abusive, alcoholic father who was prone to increasingly frightening outbursts against his wife and children, Ewan received *The Enchiridion* like “a bolt of lightning” (17) that provided the rules and structure he desperately needed to cope with his unstable home life.[5] When Marlie brings Ewan a copy of that book on one of her charity visits to the Confederate prison at the beginning of the novel—including in it her handwritten comments and questions about its philosophy—it indicates how Marlie’s developing relationship with Ewan will challenge the guidelines he has been living by for most of his life.

Both Ewan’s and Marlie’s experiences demonstrate the pros and cons of looking to history as a guide for the present. In Ewan’s case, he must confront the fact that the Stoic

philosophy that has given his life so much meaning and stability in the form of *The Enchiridion* came from a society that practiced and supported slavery—a system that he is currently fighting to end. When Marlie asks him to address the inconsistency in his position, he first tries to make a distinction between modern race-based slavery and ancient slavery, which was not based on race. However, when Marlie refuses to endorse that difference, Ewan is forced to consider his privilege in being able to approach slavery as an abstract concept. He tells her, “I’ve had the privilege to pick and choose what spoke to me from those passages. To me, it is history. I was mistaken about that, though. **It is not history when we fight this war**” (96, emphasis mine).

As this passage points out, being able to ignore certain parts of history, or treat them as a past that is perfectly sealed off and separate from the present, is a position of privilege that distorts history and its lessons. Marlie does not demand that Ewan give up all of his Stoic principles, but she does insist that he place them in context and acknowledge both the ancient world’s failings and their continued impact on contemporary society. Meanwhile, she must come to terms with the fact that she will never truly know how her mother felt about Stephen Lynch. While her family history and systemic imbalances of power between white men and Black women provide important context for her relationship with Ewan, they do not determine its outcome. Marlie’s mother’s wisdom is a comfort and support to her, but her mother’s experience is not a road map to her future.

To make sure that the reader doesn’t lose this point about the connections between the past, present, and future, Cole has Ewan think about the ways future societies might react to his moment in history: “he knew American slavery to be a horrible stain upon the world. Would it be brushed away so cavalierly when people read of America in some distant future?” (96). This is a rhetorical question for Ewan—it is part of what scholar Alan Robinson (following Reinhart Koselleck) calls the *past future* of the character, which is a future the character may wonder about or plan for, but that does not yet exist for them. As Robinson points out in *Narrating the Past* (2011), characters (or people) living in the past can conceive “an indeterminate, as yet open future, with all the contingent possibilities of how things might turn out,” while the historian or novelist looking back sees only “the unalterable past” of events as they actually played out (22).

This gap between what might have happened and what has happened opens space for counterfactual historical fictions (like steampunk), as Robinson discusses. However, Cole’s realistic mode of historical fiction in *A Hope Divided* does not direct the reader toward counterfactual possibilities.[6] Instead, she uses her characters’ musings about possible futures to prompt the reader to think about what actually happened in the aftermath of the Civil War and how it is remembered today. Historian Nicole M. Jackson, reflecting on Rita Dandridge’s work on Black romance, describes freedom as “the ultimate, unwritten epilogue” for “Black historical romances set in slavery” (2). As Jackson demonstrates, Cole’s works, which include novellas and novels set in American history from the Revolutionary period through the Civil Rights movement, are each “constellations in a larger galaxy of HEAs, achieved through the ending of slavery and fights to define and defend community freedoms” (10). The happily-ever-after of each of Cole’s stories is embedded within a larger historical narrative where true happiness for marginalized Americans, particularly Black Americans, is not yet realized. In an ideal world, Cole and her readers in this contemporary moment would be able to look back and say the epilogue has been written and equality has been

achieved, but we are not there, and Cole is very direct about that fact in *A Hope Divided* (and even more so in the final book in the trilogy, *An Unconditional Freedom*).

## Conclusion

In 2002, Angelyn Mitchell concluded her book on Black women's historical novels about slavery by writing that "One could argue that slavery's 'unassimilated' nature—the fact that our nation has never come to terms with its past—continues to haunt not only the literary imaginations of contemporary Black women writers but the national memory as well" (147). Cole's Civil War novels, the works of her contemporaries, and the ongoing legislative, historical, and cultural attempts to erase, normalize, or even endorse America's violent and racist past, particularly with regard to slavery, show that we continue to be haunted over two decades after Mitchell wrote those words. *A Hope Divided* is not just an example of corrective history, or a demonstration of how history is framed differently by different tellers (though it is those things). It is also an argument for how to engage with American history as the country moves forward, one that advocates for the more perfect union that was once promised, at a moment that Cole dared to dream it might come to be. Though Cole does not incorporate religion into her book, the spirit of the novel aligns with what scholar John Ernest defines as "liberation historiography," which includes "an understanding of history that was decidedly moral, and an understanding of principle that was inseparable from practice" (19). Like the early African American writers and speakers Ernest examines, Cole's historical writing is attuned toward action. Like them, her writing is "identifying the terms by which a fragmented community could understand itself historically, and by which history could be understood so as to identify moral responsibility, and by which moral responsibility could be transformed into concrete action" (Ernest 19).

While liberation historiography provides one framework to understand Cole's novel, the romance genre structure also aligns with Cole's project of affirmative, active historical engagement with an eye toward present change for the better. Romance novels are ideally positioned to enable this kind of narrative work because of their focus on a happy and satisfying ending for their protagonists. Of course, not every romance takes advantage of this opportunity—some avoid this kind of narrative work, or take explicitly or implicitly racist or retrograde positions. But many historical romances, especially recent ones by marginalized authors, use the *past future* of their characters to help readers consider how the past can be better understood and used as a tool to work toward liberation, and use the language of love to show the way. In *A Hope Divided*, Ewan isn't the only character to imagine the *past future*. During their journey, Ewan and Marlie meet an enslaved woman named Sallie who has her own vision of the future:

"The first thing I want to do after this war is won is go see things," Sallie said.

"Just walk out across this country and see everything I heard of and never got to see with my own eyes."

"You sound so sure the North will win," Marlie said.

"You the one with eyes like you can see the past and the future," Sallie said.

"You really think the South will win? You feel that they will?"

Marlie closed her eyes, inhaled, and then shook her head. "No."

“Then I need to start planning. Think I might go out West and find me some gold.” (212)

Sallie’s certainty in this moment, combined with the reader’s historical knowledge that the Union *did* win the Civil War, is a reminder that hope is not always foolish. More importantly, there is Ewan and Marlie’s relationship. If Ewan, a flawed white man steeped in ancient Greek philosophy who has violently tortured Confederate soldiers for information as part of his work for the army, can change his foundational views to become someone who loves and is beloved by Marlie, and if Marlie can trust that his commitment to her is sincere despite the generations of history that call their relationship into question, then maybe, possibly, there is hope. Hope, not just for them, but for the Union of the United States in the immediate future of the novel, and in the future of its readers as well. Like Marlie, Ewan, and the other characters in *A Hope Divided*, we cannot know what the future holds; we can only see the hard work that lies ahead. But we’ve been somewhere like this before, Cole reminds us, and with active and abiding hope to drive the work forward, change has been, and continues to be, possible.

---

[1] Though the show opted for multiracial casting, Quinn’s books feature only white characters and do not meaningfully acknowledge the racial dynamics of the nineteenth century.

[2] See WGHP-TV, Greensboro; Tiberii; Robertson.

[3] See, for example, articles by Nicole M. Jackson and Margo Hendricks on Black romance, and the essays published in the collections *Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction* and *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction* edited by Hsu-Ming Teo and Paloma Fresno-Calleja.

[4] For instance, Thomas Jefferson had a copy in his library (Jefferson 52).

[5] Ewan is interpreted as neurodivergent by some reviewers and readers in social media discussions, though that language is not explicitly present in the text (see Lauren).

[6] Cole does flirt with counterfactual history more nearly in the third book of the trilogy, *An Unconditional Freedom*, which explores the idea of assassinating Jefferson Davis but does not ultimately enact it.

## Works Cited

- Auman, William T. *Civil War in the North Carolina Quaker Belt: The Confederate Campaign Against Peace Agitators, Deserters and Draft Dodgers*. McFarland & Company, Inc. 2014.
- Auman, William T. and David D. Scarboro. "The Heroes of America in Civil War North Carolina." *The North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 58, no. 4, Oct. 1981, pp. 327–363.
- Bohan, Chara Haeussler, et al. "The Mint Julep Consensus: An Analysis of Late 19th Century Southern and Northern Textbooks and Their Impact on the History Curriculum." *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, vol. 44, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 139–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2019.02.002>.
- Byerman, Keith. *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*. University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Cerabino, Frank. "Truth? You Can't Handle the Truth!: The Never-Ending Task of Rewriting History in Florida." *The Palm Beach Post*, 5 Mar. 2024, <https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/opinion/columns/2024/03/05/florida-education-rewriting-history-new-teachings-on-slavery/72839194007/>.
- Cole, Alyssa. *A Hope Divided*. Kensington, 2017.
- . *An Extraordinary Union*. Kensington, 2017.
- . *An Unconditional Freedom*. Kensington, 2019.
- Collier, Kiah. "Texas' Controversial Social Studies Textbooks Under Fire Again." *The Texas Tribune*, 5 Oct. 2015, <https://www.texastribune.org/2015/10/05/controversial-20-social-studies-textbooks-under-fire-/>.
- Dandridge, Rita B. *Black Women's Activism: Reading African American Women's Historical Romance*. Peter Lang, 2004.
- Darity, William A., and A. Kirsten Mullen. *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- De Groot, Jerome. *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fiction*. Routledge, 2016.
- Ernest, John. *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Gerhardt, Deborah R. "Law in the Shadows of Confederate Monuments." *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–88. *Proquest*, <https://doi.org/10.36643/mjrl.27.1.law>.
- Handley-Cousins, Sarah. "Love Is a Battlefield: Civil War Memory in Modern Romance Novels." *They Are Dead and Yet They Live: Civil War Memories in a Polarized America*, edited by John M. Kinder and Jennifer M. Murray, University of Nebraska Press, 2026, pp. 152–69.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1988.
- Isensee, Laura. "How Textbooks Can Teach Different Versions Of History." *NPR*, 13 July 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/07/13/421744763/how-text-books-can-teach-different-versions-of-history>.

- Jackson, Nicole M. "Freedom's Epilogue: Love as Freedom in Alyssa Cole's Historical Novellas." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 11, May 2022, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.70138/ZYOB2141>.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Thomas Jefferson's Library: A Catalog with the Entries in His Own Order*, edited by James Gilreath, Douglas L. Wilson, Library of Congress, 1989.
- Jenkins, Beverly. "Conversation with Beverly Jenkins." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 11, May 2022, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.70138/OWNC7118>.
- Kinnard, Meg, and Jeffrey Collins. "Dylann Roof Sentenced to Death for Killing 9 Church Members." *AP News*, 10 Jan. 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/dylann-roof-sentenced-death-for-killing-9-church-members-ba912545b5dc40729c80328d598ac550>.
- Lauren. "Review: A Hope Divided – Alyssa Cole." *Llama Reads Books*, 26 Nov. 2017, <http://www.llamareadsbooks.com/blog/index.php/2017/11/26/review-a-hope-divided-alyssa-cole/>.
- Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Moore, Jeania Ree V. "The Religious Work of Beverly Jenkins's Black Historical Romance." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 14, Feb. 2025, pp. 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.70138/KBQG2589>.
- Nunes, Ana. *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Piligian, Ellen. "Author Beverly Jenkins Delivers the Unexpected." *Detroit Free Press*, 21 Jan. 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/arts/2018/01/31/beverly-jenkins-romance-novelist-tempest/1079959001/>.
- Posti, Piia K. "'I Get to Exist as a Black Person in the World': *Bridgerton* as Speculative Romance and Alternate History on Screen." *History and Speculative Fiction*, edited by John L. Hennessey, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024, pp. 123–49, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42235-5\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42235-5_7).
- Robertson, Gary D. "North Carolina Appeals Court Upholds Ruling That Kept Confederate Monument in Place." *AP News*, 19 Mar. 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-confederate-monument-appeals-court-c192b0906f67f264d8c1cae096e0b076>.
- Robinson, Alan. *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel*. Palgrave, 2011.
- Sarapin, Susan H., et al. "Living Among Confederate Icons: Perpetuating White Supremacist Beliefs and Blindness to Black Suffering." *Studies in Social Justice*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2023, pp. 384–408. *Proquest*, [doi:10.26522/ssj.v17i3.3909](https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v17i3.3909).
- Teo, Hsu-Ming. "'Bertrice teaches you about history, and you don't even mind!': History and Revisionist Historiography in Bertrice Small's *The Kadin*." *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Sarah S. G. Franz and Eric Murphy Selinger, McFarland, 2012, pp. 21–32.
- Tiberii, Jeff. "Activists Topple Confederate Monument In North Carolina." *NPR*, Aug. 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/15/543583516/activists-topple-confederate-monument-in-north-carolina>.

- Vivanco, Laura. "Historical Accuracy, Racism, Courtney Milan, and The Duke Who Didn't Conform to Genre Norms." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 11, June 2022, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.70138/VVGT3522>.
- WGHP-TV, Greensboro. "See the Timeline Leading to the Relocation of Winston-Salem's Confederate Monument." *TCA Regional News*, 12 Mar. 2019, <https://myfox8.com/news/see-the-timeline-leading-to-the-relocation-of-winston-salems-confederate-monument/>.
- Wolf, Zachary B. "Trump Turns Civil Rights Upside Down in 'Biggest Rollback' Since Reconstruction." *CNN*, 2 May 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/02/politics/trump-civil-rights-rollback-what-matters>.