INTERRACIAL ROMANCE NOVELS AND
THE RESOLUTION OF RACIAL DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a study of the emerging subgenre of category romance novels that depict interracial relationships, specifically relationships between black women and white men. Employing textual analysis of twenty-six novels published from 1995-2005, by romance publishers such as Harlequin, Silhouette, and Genesis Press, and situating them as category romance novels targeted towards a black female audience and written by black female authors, this study argues that these novels constitute a new subgenre, and that the conventions and themes that are common to these novels conceptualize racial difference as the most salient issue in the depiction of interracial romantic relationships, while simultaneously arguing that romantic love is fundamentally apolitical.

This study is an exploration of the generic conventions of this emerging subgenre, explaining the common approaches to four specific issues in the novels: the need to delineate racial categories and the reliance on essentialist understandings of race; the use of a reluctant, independent heroine and an idealistic hero, which corresponds to both the trend towards softer masculinity in the media during the time period in which these novels were written, and the need to avoid a reification of a master/slave dynamic between the white hero and black heroine; the use of wealthy heroines to level the economic resources of the characters, thus leaving no economic motive for the black heroine to pursue the white hero and elevating the racial difference to a position as the only important social disparity between the characters; and the depiction of various characters' discomfort with the idea of children of an interracial union and their effect on
the preservation of racial strata, contrasted with other characters' assumptions that multiracial
children are the welcome remedy to racial discrimination.

The conclusion reached is that these novels use the traditional category romance argument
that romantic love is powerful enough to overcome anything, in concert with generic conventions
that are specific to the emerging subgenre, to offer the black female reader a fantasy space in
which transgressive love is more powerful than deeply ingrained societal prejudices.
For Jordyn and Christen, whenever they may read it.

And for Roderick, of course.
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Instrumental in finding materials for this project were the internet discussion groups and message boards devoted to romance novels, and though I was an observer and not a participant, I must acknowledge the users who spent time compiling lists of novels from disparate places that I might not have found otherwise.
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INTRODUCTION

Since 1995, the year in which Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love* was published, category romance publishers have slowly started to offer novels that feature romances between characters of different races. This paper argues that these interracial romance novels are an emerging subgenre, with specific generic conventions that differ from the traditional romance. Most often, these novels are written by black women, feature heroines who are black women, and are published by houses whose primary product is romances featuring black characters. The novels tend to follow the standard plotline for the romance genre, presenting a hero and a heroine who fall in love during the course of the story, face a challenge that threatens their relationship, and then resolve the conflict, allowing for a happy ending (one that usually features either a proposal of marriage or a wedding). The interracial romance novels in this study vary not in their overall structure, but in the specific conflicts that arise, and the generic conventions that have developed as the subgenre has grown.

Although these novels are a relatively new phenomenon, particular themes and tropes are used so often, regardless of author, year of publication, or publisher, that it is possible to understand them as part of a subgenre with its own conventions. In almost all of the novels that I analyze, the primary problem to be solved is that of racial difference. Most of the novels feature black heroines who are reluctant to enter into a relationship with the white hero, and use the theme of racial difference as the primary external influence that causes problems for the characters. The dilemma for the heroine is not a solely personal one, as the conflict often is in more traditional romance novels. The heroines in these novels must face and, to a certain extent, defeat a society in which race matters. Unlike other romance novels that position the hero as the
object to be conquered, the hero in these novels is already on the heroine’s side, and her project in the novel is to learn to believe in his (often naïve) understanding of society and its attitudes about race.

By removing all other complicating factors that separate the characters and focusing on race as the primary problem keeping the hero and heroine apart, the novels argue for love as a way to overcome racial prejudice, making racial difference seem as if it has no inherent significance. However, they complicate this aim by positioning racial categories as central to an individual’s identity. If the novels were to focus on race as simply one of many factors to be overcome, they would present a much less bleak outlook for racial politics. Allowing race to be portrayed as the primary problem, which must always be solved, effectively argues for racial difference as a serious obstacle, while simultaneously arguing that it is not important enough to keep the characters apart. In these novels, the systemic nature of racism is rarely explored as deeply as the idea of personalized racism. In order to make racism seem as if it can be rendered unimportant, the novels often depict ignorance rather than malice in their racist characters.

Additionally, the novels position black characters as the ones with the reservations about the implications of their romances, making white characters necessarily more progressive and more willing to embark on a relationship that has political consequences. This allows for a romanticized image of the white hero as someone who is willing to fight injustice to be with the black heroine, but it gives a less than flattering view of the black heroine and other black characters in the novels.

As the novels are meant to be read by a black audience, for the most part, this makes sense. With a few exceptions, the novels are written by black women and are marketed through black publishing lines. Therefore, the conflict has to be something that the black female
audience will respond to, and this audience would probably not respond well to a white hero who shows reservations about the race of the heroine. As Laura Kinsale states, while reading romance novels “the reader rides along with the [lead female] character, having the same experiences but accepting or rejecting the character’s actions, words, and emotions on the basis of her personal yardstick.” (Kinsale 32) The heroines of these novels can be read as avatars for the audience, because they depict the position that black women in this type of situation would face. The arguments put forth by the heroines’ families are so familiar as to be cliché, offering the reader a societal context for the heroine’s actions that corresponds to the real world. Due to the heroine’s status as “placeholder” (to use Kinsale’s term) the most important actions in the book are therefore those of the hero, and those actions are the ones that the reader must find intelligible in order for the novel to be successful. The heroine orients the reader in the societal context, setting the stage for the narrative, while the hero, and his successes and failures in wooing the heroine, forms the structure of the plot.

It logically follows that a hero who showed reluctance to be romantically involved with a black woman would be harder for a black female reader to accept than a heroine who showed reservations about being involved with a white man. The heroine’s reservations are naturalized, because they are familiar to the reader and echo much of society’s understanding of the problems in dating outside one’s racial category. The hero’s dilemma, however, forms the core of the narrative, simply because it offers a different way of looking at the politics of race than that offered by the black heroine who reiterates the views of the larger society. Many of the novels depict the heroine’s changing attitudes towards the relationship with the hero as a sign of personal growth. By depicting the heroine as the character who has to learn to overcome her
prejudices, the novels present the heroes as paragons of open-minded virtue. The heroines must live up to the standard set by the heroes, who have no problems with letting love conquer all.

This paper aims to analyze the ways in which these novels situate white masculinity in opposition to black femininity and the picture of race relations that opposition creates. While I do examine some novels that have characters with a different racial makeup, the bulk of the novels have heroines who are black and heroes who are white. Most of these novels were found using lists that readers had assembled on websites and mailing lists for romance novels. While most of the lists I found aimed to gather all novels that featured interracial romantic pairings, most of the novels featured a black heroine and a white hero. I also gathered novels from the sole publishing house that publishes a line of interracial novels, the Love Spectrum imprint of Genesis Press. Genesis is a small publishing house that publishes mainly mainstream black romance novels, and most of the Love Spectrum novels involve the black heroine/white hero configuration. While I do not plan to explore in this paper why this is the most popular interracial dynamic, I do think it is important to note.

The other defining characteristic of the novels I analyze in this paper is that they are published as romance novels. Rather than focusing on all novels which involve an interracial romance, I have chosen to specifically look at mass-market paperback novels, most of which were published under romance imprints, and the rest of which were written by authors known for their category romances. A few of the novels were published under imprints that could be classified as black “chick lit,” with a focus on romance, although they are not specifically “romance publishers.”

Also important to understanding the racial politics of the novels is the fact that the earliest one, Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love*, was published in 1995. The category romance
novel featuring an interracial relationship between blacks and whites is a very recent phenomenon, and while there are more published every year, the number is still minuscule in comparison to the number of romance novels that feature pairings of characters who are the same race. I found fewer than thirty books that fit the parameters of this study. Recently, Harlequin and Silhouette have started to publish interracial romance novels, but the bulk of the books still come from black publishing houses and e-book publishers.

In traditional category romances, racial difference was restricted to the stereotypes of the “Arab Sheik” and the “Indian Chief,” both of which were often incorporated into a white European milieu by the end of the novel, a trend which has continued steadily for nearly a century. It is rare to find category romances that have Asian or Asian-American characters (I found two) and Harlequin has only recently started it own line of romances featuring Latino characters. The romance publishing landscape is still largely white and segregated.

The racial politics of the black/white novels reflect their specific cultural moment by depicting an environment in which racism is more of a matter of changing the attitudes of the characters than one of fighting against a physically hostile, potentially dangerous society. The novels argue that race is a social construction that has significance and weight, but that significance is most clearly seen on an individual level, an ideology of race which is expressed through a few different trends that regularly occur in the novels studied.

The first chapter of the project is an attempt to theorize exactly how race is defined in these novels and what ideology of race is communicated to the reader. The emphasis on defining characters by their race and using that as the salient issue in the romantic relationship is dependent upon an essentialist ideology of race. To understand the conflict that race creates between the characters, the reader must see race as a defining characteristic of the hero and
heroine, and also as something that cannot be changed or overcome. Rather than other types of obstacles that characters in other romance novels face (such as class difference, or interpersonal problems), race is presented as something that has to be overcome without being resolved or changed. The chapter also discusses the problem of “passing” in the novels and the way in which most authors, even when they discuss race as a mutable characteristic, present it as a secret that must be revealed, rather than as something that can be changed at will.

The second chapter details the characters of the hero and heroine and how the decision to use particular types of stock romance characters allows for a depiction of racial difference as a problem that can be easily solved. The use of the post-Reagan era sensitive hero and the strong-willed independent heroine that is common in almost all of the novels creates a situation in which the hero can be portrayed as strong and sure of himself without threatening the heroine’s strength. As the use of a domineering white hero and a submissive black heroine would recreate an offensive racial stereotype, one that the characters in the novels often decry, the use of these specific character traits allows the authors to tell a story to which the reader is less likely to object.

Chapter Three discusses the impact of socioeconomic class on the racial politics of the novels. By giving the heroines a more privileged status than many romance novel heroines, the authors allow the heroines to argue that the only gains they make from the relationship are emotional ones. While romance novels have a history of depicting women with an interest in money as unworthy of love, these novels remove the question entirely by making the heroines as wealthy as, if not more wealthy than, the heroes.

The final chapter deals with the threat of reproduction posed by interracial relationships. In many of the novels, the strongest opposition to the characters’ relationship is due to the fear of
what their children will have to face. Whether this is a genuine concern for the possible children or simply a fear of the loss of white privilege, the problem of children is continually brought up by both white and black characters.

The study of category romance novels has historically focused on the question of gender representation to the exclusion of other understandings of the texts. Studies such as Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) situate category romances as media products that are targeted at women and consumed primarily by women, thus making the emphasis on gender a valid approach, although the reliance on that lens to understand category romance overlooks other meanings that are being made.

While the academic discussion of romance novels has increased in recent years, there is little effort made to discuss the depiction of race in romances. This may be partially due to the fact that the few category romance publishers that market to black audiences are relatively new. However, even in the most recent romance scholarship, there has been little emphasis on how the romance formula changes with characters who are not white, or with relationships between characters who are of different races. When race is discussed in the scholarship, it is rarely in detail (an exception to this is Jay Dixon’s 1999 study of Mills & Boon romances). While the scholarship available does offer insights to many of the issues in the novels discussed in this study, there is still a void. As a black woman and a fan of romance novels, I felt that this absence was conspicuous, as the racial politics had a definite impact on my reading experience.

The novels argue a specific political viewpoint: that love is apolitical. By making the hero sympathetic and the heroine strong, giving the characters the same socioeconomic background, and arguing that children will solve everything, the novels avoid any discussion of political implications of interracial relationships. The overriding theme of the novels is the
supremacy of romantic love. In contrast, many literary novels that deal with interracial relationships, such as *Meeting of the Waters* or *Strange Fruit*, use the relationship as a backdrop to tell a specifically political story. By reversing the importance of the themes and prioritizing romance above politics, the novels in this study provide a fantasy in which love, especially socially transgressive love, can solve political problems.
CHAPTER I. ESSENTIALISM AND THE NEED FOR RACIAL CATEGORIES

Racial essentialism is a key component in the stories presented in many interracial romance novels. For the most part, the novels argue that race is immutable and unchangeable. Rather than solving the problem of race by rethinking its social construction, the novels use two approaches to solve the problem: 1) establishing the difference and then overcoming it without problematizing it; and 2) changing the other characters’ understanding of the hero’s race so that he occupies the same racial category as the heroine, thus erasing the difference.

The first task of these books is to clearly establish the racial difference between the hero and the heroine. While it is standard in romance novels to give physical descriptions of the characters, it becomes clear in each of the novels that the conflict will be about their racial difference. By establishing that the characters are uncomfortable with or surprised by their attraction to someone of a different race, the novels posit that race is an important factor, one that must be overcome. The inclusion of the characters’ issues with racial difference make it clear that the novels position race as a defining factor of identity. These novels posit that racial difference has societal implications: even as the characters argue that love can overcome any differences, they state that race is a difference, and it is something to be both challenged and eroticized. Most often it is the heroine who has the problem with race, and sees it as an immutable obstacle, while the hero is given more leeway to see the racial difference as either simply a superficial difference or an exotic characteristic to be valued but not dwelled upon.

Often, the novels use other black characters to establish societal attitudes about race. In Karyn Langhorne’s *A Personal Matter* (2004), the “other man,” who works as a foil for the hero, is immediately suspicious of the hero. He repeatedly asks the heroine what she is doing with a
white man, and is only placated when she reveals that the hero is her boss. By positioning herself as subordinate to the hero, the heroine can be forgiven for associating with him. Some of the other novels, including Lori Bryant-Woolridge’s *Hitts and Mrs.* (2004) and Dar Tomlinson’s *A Risk of Rain* (2000), use this tactic, making clear that other people in the society are uncomfortable with the idea of changing the status quo, even as they object to the discrimination that makes people more comfortable with a black woman being in a position of subordination to a white man than in an equal relationship.

Dar Tomlinson’s *A Risk of Rain* (2000) is a novel that follows the trope of the renewed relationship that is popular in many contemporary romance novel lines. The hero and heroine dated as teenagers, married, and then divorced due to pressure from the hero’s family. The hero, a professional golfer, runs into the heroine when he finds she is caddying for another player, as she used to caddy for him during their relationship. The resolution of the novel involves the couple reuniting, and it represents that reunion with the heroine regaining her position as his caddy, a job that has historically been associated with subordination of black men (the novel even has a stereotypical grizzled old black man who has been caddying for years). The idea underpinning this attitude is that the culture cannot change, and that the heroine’s reluctance to enter into a relationship with the hero is due to the fact that she has every reason to doubt his ability to ignore the societal implications of their relationship. Only in rare cases is the hero shown as being aware of the problem, which serves two purposes: to position the heroine, as a black woman, as more burdened by the societal attitudes towards race, and to show that the hero is pure enough in his intent to not even consider the problem until it is brought to his attention. Most of the novels make clear that the heroines are uncomfortable with or shocked by their initial attraction to someone of a different race, presenting the characters as people who are on a
journey from the state of “normalcy” to one of greater understanding and openness. Many mainstream romance novels follow this plotline, establishing the characters, especially heroes, as people who have to learn something from the relationship detailed in the novel. Theorists often discuss how the romance novel formula is about the heroine conquering the hero and remaking him into someone who fits the idealized mold of a strong and yet emotionally giving man who is thus husband material. Doreen Owens Malek and Robyn Donald, both of whom analyze the “hero as challenge” trope, discuss a type of novel in which the hero is conquered by the relationship with the heroine.

A key difference between the traditional romance novel trope and the pattern seen in most of the novels in this study is that these novels do not present the hero as the challenge to the heroine. Rather, they offer race as the stumbling block which both the heroine and, to a lesser extent, the hero must overcome. Without clearly delineating that race is the main issue, the novels cannot then resolve it.

Many of the novels have the heroines telling the heroes about how they are oblivious to the problems of race, and arguing that if they were more aware they would understand that it is not wise to involve themselves in the relationship. Gwynne Forster’s Against the Wind features the heroine telling the hero, “You have to give some serious thought to the social consequences of an involvement with me before you get any deeper.” To which the hero replies, “Do you think I’m blind to what goes on in the world? My only concerns are for our feelings for each other. Your opinions and mine.” (Forster 98) Although many of the novels feature exchanges such as this one, only a few of them argue that the hero’s intractability about the subject of race reveals an ignorance of the social implications. Langhorne’s novel, possibly because it has an unusually strong heroine, shows the characters arguing explicitly about whether or not the hero is
willfully ignoring racial issues. The author shows that the hero is aware of the problems and is not happy with the heroine’s ideas about him.

When discussing how unhappy he is with her assumptions about white men, the hero tells her exactly how he sees her resistance to his advances:

“Assumption number one: whitey is out to get me.”

Alayna glared at him. “I never said that—…”

“You keep your guard high—“

“That’s because—“

“Of assumption number two: whitey can’t be trusted. Not one of us. Never.”

(Langhorne 251)

By presenting a hero who directly confronts the heroine’s distrust of white men, Langhorne offers a more solid case for her characters’ romance than many of the other novels do. She depicts a hero who is not just in love, but is aware of the implications of the relationship. Many of the novels are not as strong on this point, as if entering into a discussion of racial problems will show that perhaps the relationship is not strong enough to overcome it. As long as the race of the characters remains an insignificant and exotic difference, the arguments of people who oppose the relationship seem easy to overcome.

In some cases, the novels present the racial difference as something that can be solved with the revelation of the hero’s secret racial heritage. Although the novels argue that race is unimportant when compared with the grand, overwhelming love of the characters, this is shown to be an argument that is not very compelling. After all, if race is completely unimportant, then the revelation that the hero is passing for white (often without knowing he is doing so) would not change any of the dynamics of the relationship.
Rather than making the argument that race is changeable and can be defined in multiple ways, the novels that feature passing often only accept one way of crossing the line as acceptable. In two of the novels, passing for white is something to be remedied. When characters who are identified as white reveal the “truth” of their blackness, it is seen as being an ultimate truth, one that can resolve the inauthentic whiteness that existed before it. This attitude towards passing reflects the idea that whiteness must be pure and untainted to be truly white: even in this context of the supposed breaking of barriers, the novels are operating on the “one-drop” rule of determining race.

In Beverly Clark’s *A Twist of Fate* (2003) the hero and heroine are brought together by a fertility clinic accident that impregnated the heroine with the hero’s sperm. Throughout the novel the issues of biracial children and the problems they might face are explored, but the main obstacle in the story is the racist attitude of the hero’s mother.

At the end of the novel, the hero and heroine learn that the hero’s mother has this attitude because she is secretly passing for white. “My whole life has been a lie… Because my skin was so pale, my aunt urged me to pass for white and never acknowledge my black heritage,” she says (Clark 363-364) and then proceeds to explain that she never wanted her children to associate with black people for fear of revealing her heritage. The mother’s revelation gives the hero a context for his mother’s disapproval, but it also casts the mother as unequivocally black. Even her name was changed: she is not really Suzette Lynn Cardoneaux, she is Sally Mae Cotton. The mother is prompted to tell the truth because one of the children that the hero and heroine have does not look at all white to them, and the mother has to allay fears about the child’s paternity by explaining that she is black, and thus it is understandable that the child would appear to be black also.
By positioning the mother as black, the novel states that there is really no racial transgression happening. Rather we are being given a white hero who is truly black, and thus acceptable as the love interest for a black woman. Later, when the hero confronts the heroine’s brother, who has never been comfortable with a white man dating his sister, he asks if their relationship is suddenly acceptable, “since you know I’m black too.” (Clark 374) While the author plays this as sarcasm, the story suggests that the hero is right in this. The relationship is more acceptable because of the revelation of “true” race. The mother revealing her secret leads to a reconciliation with her son and his new wife, the heroine’s brother learns to accept his new brother-in-law, and while there is some discussion of why the mother felt the need to pass for white, there is no questioning of why exactly she is considered black now. The hero refers to his mother as “only part white” even after his mother has explained to him that her father was white and her mother was one-quarter white. In order to reconcile the family, the whiteness must be stripped from the mother.

However, *A Twist of Fate* has a contentious relationship with the “purity” of whiteness. Although the hero’s whiteness is called into question by the revelation of his mother’s race, and the reader may be left with the idea that he is now safely black enough to be with the heroine, he never considers himself black aside from the one conversation with his brother-in-law. The hero discusses his black heritage, and his mother’s blackness, but he somehow manages to retain a sense of his own whiteness. It is almost as if he is not black enough to be considered black, while his mother apparently is. The novel never argues that this is because he appears to be white, or is culturally white. Rather, it simply says that his mother is now black, and he could possibly be considered black by people who are truly concerned with racial categories, but the hero does not take the time to discuss what this change of racial category does to his own
identity. Even in a conversation with his brother, neither character says they are now black: it is always couched in the terms of their mother’s race. Clark seems willing to use the plot device of passing in much the same way that earlier romance novels have resolved the problem of race with their exotic heroes.

As Jay Dixon explains, in E.M. Hull’s *The Sheik* (1919) and Louise Gerard’s *The Sultan’s Slave* (1921) the exotic Arab heroes are rendered safe by the explanation of their European heritage, with the revelation of that heritage forming a plot point in Gerard’s novel. (Dixon 52) Revelations of shared ethnic heritage make the hero acceptable while maintaining his exoticism. While, in the earlier novels, the news that the hero was not Arab made the hero seem safe, in these novels the hero’s secret blackness makes the relationship understandable, as if the heroine could tell all along that the hero was black. By positioning the heroes as “just black enough,” the heroine’s choice to be with the hero is validated, while maintaining the exoticism of being with someone who looks white.

In Marilyn Lee’s *Playing With Fire*, the hero already has a sense of his own blackness, despite how he looks. Rather than having a hero who acknowledges that race is constructed and thus arbitrary, as another approach might have argued, Lee’s novel argues that race is inborn and unchangeable, regardless of the physical attributes of the individual. Lee’s hero, Adam Hayden, had a white father and a black mother, but was raised by his mother and his black stepfather. The heroine, Shannon, meets him through his daughter, and her first comment to him is that the daughter never told her she had a white father, immediately causing the hero’s anger. Despite his pale skin and blue eyes, he is black, he assures her, and her discomfort and incredulity cause most of the tension between the characters for the rest of the book. By creating a character who is black due more to how he was raised and what he believes about himself than any outside
input, Lee manages to make an interracial romance novel that actually has no interracial romance.

Lee’s book is distributed through Ellora’s Cave Publishing, which does both e-book publishing and paper publishing, and it is significant that the Ellora’s Cave website lists Playing With Fire in their interracial romances category. The fact that the character considers himself black is less important than the fact that the novel considers him white. Towards the end of the novel, when the hero and heroine have the conflict that will lead to their eventual reconciliation (as the contemporary romance formula dictates), it takes the form of an argument between Shannon and Adam’s daughter, Dana. Dana insinuates that Shannon is too fat for her father, and Shannon responds by saying that perhaps she wants to be with a man who is “one hundred percent black.” As Adam hears this, he asks Shannon if he is black enough for her. He tells her, “I don’t care what I look like on the outside, inside is what counts and I am black there!” (Lee 78) The novel positions Adam as someone who has spent a large portion of his life assuring others that he is as black as he says he is, regardless of their opinions.

As Adam and Shannon reconcile he explains to her that,

“All my life, Shannon, I’ve had to try to live in two different worlds. Do you know what a struggle that’s been for me? Too white for my black roots and too black for my white roots. Even Dana’s had to deal with being teased because of the color of my skin… I can’t change the color of my skin or eyes or the texture of my hair.” (Lee 80)

He then asks Shannon never to mention the color of his skin again. The novel’s resolution does not come from a realization that the hero is black, just as he says, or that the heroine was wrong to ever look at him as a white man, but rather with his demand that she
promise to ignore his skin color. Rather than the author eliding the problem and thus arguing that there is not one, as in Clark’s *A Twist of Fate*, Lee makes the *characters* elide the problem, therefore communicating to the audience that there still is one.

The problem of being “black enough” has different implications and some striking similarities when the heroine is the one whose race is contentious. J.J. Murray’s *Something Real* offers a heroine who is of mixed race, and a hero whose children are also biracial. The novel is very clear that the heroine, Penny, is black. She mentions that her father might have been Irish, and that she has suffered teasing in her childhood because of her light skin, but the novel never gives her the kind of intense emotional upheaval that the heroes whose race is ambiguous must face. Penny simply has lighter skin than many of the other black people she knows, and that is something she rarely questions until she meets the hero.

Unlike the novels in which the hero’s blackness provides a point of commonality for him and the heroine, Penny’s racial background does not serve that purpose for her and the hero, Dewey. The point of racial commonality for them comes from the fact that Dewey has dated black women before, and he is thus able to handle the societal implications of this choice. He does not see her race as an obstacle. In making the characters comfortable with the heroine’s racial background, Murray’s novel displays the type of essentialism with which the other novels wrestle. Penny is black, and regardless of how much of her background may be white, she looks black and that is enough. This is also reflected in the way that Dewey’s children are portrayed. Multiple characters ask about the children’s father, who must have light skin to have children that look like that. Until Dewey shows up, the assumption is that the children are black, and once he does appear, they are described as mixed. They are never considered white.
What does raise issues of race in the novel is the hero’s comfort with being around black people. Although he has black children and is dating a black woman, the residents of Penny’s neighborhood have no idea how to deal with a white man who seems comfortable in their milieu. The problem of race is one that black people seem unable to overcome in these novels. The heroine is depicted as going out on a limb when she accepts her own interest in a white man. When the novels make the white character fit better into a black environment, whether through their own attitudes or due to a discovery of racial similarity, the problem of race is not actually being solved, it is simply being rendered unimportant to the characters.

The emphasis on white heroes either becoming “more black” or wanting to fit into a black environment is in keeping with an ideology of whiteness as bland or uninteresting (bell hook’s “Eating the Other” with its discussion of anhedonia is a good explanation of this ideological standpoint). Historically, the interracial relationships depicted in romance novels have been between white women and men who are either Arab (as mentioned above, with the prototypical *The Sheik*) or Native American. With the “Indian Chief” stereotype that often shows up in romance novels from the 1970s on, the character is either shown as being part white, which solves the problem in much the same way that *The Sheik* does, or the hero is allowed to remain dangerously exotic. Because these novels are often set in a nineteenth-century Western environment, the rhetoric of race that the characters espouse is predominantly one of protecting white womanhood, with the heroine deciding that her relationship with the hero is more fulfilling (and, importantly, more exhilarating) than conforming to standards of what a white woman should do.

In the case of the sheikh stereotype, which shows up from the earliest Mills & Boon novels through to contemporary times, the end result is the same: the white woman finds that the
relationship is far more exciting than her mundane life as a secretary in England. She then runs away to live in the exotic Middle East. Despite multiple descriptions of this trope in romance novel scholarship, there is little discussion of the racial implications inherent in the dynamic. It is as if the Native American and Arab characters are “white enough” to not be alarming. The trend gets collapsed into the trope of the dark, handsome hero, who, under this theory, could just as easily be Spanish as he could be Saudi Arabian. While there are significant racial politics at work here, it is important to note that the novels themselves do not make as much of a racial differentiation between the characters as a cultural one: the heroes are never African or Asian, and they can generally pass for white. They are exotic enough to be a safe danger.

The difference between this traditional approach to exoticism and the one displayed in the black/white interracial novels is twofold: the white heroes are most often the ones benefiting from exposure to the exotic, and the danger presented by the exoticism is of a different character than that in the more traditional novels. The black heroines, when they describe the heroes, rarely state that they enjoy the physical or cultural differences. Most often, they are bothered by the difference, as in the case of A Personal Matter’s Alayna, who says to herself, in reference to the hero, “Lord, I’ll take one just like him. In black.” (Langhorne 146) The difference is not an opportunity to enjoy the exotic, it is an experience that has to be rationalized and justified. The white heroes, on the other hand, freely express that they enjoy the difference in skin color and the exposure to a different culture. The sense of being exposed to a new world is something expressed only by the white heroes.

The danger of exoticism in the black/white novels is also due to the white heroes generally not performing the traditional romantic hero role of being dashing and domineering. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, the heroes of these novels are softer and more emotional,
and so the heroine is not in the position of being swept away by a stronger, forceful man. The conflation of non-whiteness with an almost animalistic danger is something that is common to the traditional Arab and Native American heroes paired with white women, but not to white men paired with black women. The generic convention of the forceful hero is something that does not comfortably fit into that type of pairing, and while this is partially due to the political implications of depicting a white man dominating a black woman, it is also due to the ideology of a whiteness that holds no exotic allure.

Two of the novels with black heroines have non-white heroes, Brenda Jackson’s *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh* (2002) and Kathleen Suzanne and Jeanne Sumerix’s *From the Ashes* (2002). Interestingly, in neither of these novels do the hero and the heroine see each other as particularly exotic due to race. Jackson’s hero Jamal, who, according to one of the heroine’s friends, “has very little tolerance for western women,” (Jackson 17) finds the heroine interesting because she is outspoken and confident, which he sees as particularly American. Unlike many of the earlier Arab sheikh novels which involved white women, the hero does not try to change the heroine, and he does not find her threatening or think that she needs to be tamed. The novel even provides the hero with an outspoken Egyptian stepmother whom he loves, as a template for his relationship with the heroine. Despite the standard elements of the Arab sheikh story, such as the heroine’s awe at the hero’s wealth and social status, the novel does not create a situation in which the heroine is happy to be dominated because of the allure of the Other. The novel also does not posit racial difference as a problem to be solved; the conflict that must be resolved is a personal one.

Similarly, *From the Ashes* depicts a relationship in which the characters’ cultural background is delineated more clearly and presents more problems than their racial difference.
The hero, Linc, is Native American and white, but is presented as culturally Native American, with the main conflict of the novel being his mother’s insistence that he must marry someone within the Chippewa Tribe. Like Jackson’s heroine Delaney, this heroine, Paige, is not depicted as an exotic object. The heroine is bothered by the fact that the hero seems to have more of a connection to his culture than she does,

She envied him. He had a culture he clung fiercely to, in fact, two cultures. She had never taken time to look into her roots, to find out where she came from, where her ancestors came from. She was just another African-American who never bothered with the culture of her people. Were they brought here as slaves? Did she have relatives in Africa, distant relatives that had a proud heritage, that knew the family history she didn’t and probably never would? (Suzanne and Sumerix 186)

Unlike the traditional romance novel with a Native American hero, there is no indication that the heroine is accessing the Other by being with the hero. The problem is not that the heroine does not have a fascinating culture of her own that she can learn about, rather it is that she has never shown an interest in her own fascinating culture. The relationship with someone of a different, non-white culture, of which he is proud, serves as a catalyst for her to seek out knowledge about her own culture, not as a site for her to experience a culture that is not her own, a difference which highlights how the approaches to whiteness and blackness are conceived in entirely different ways.

The relationships that the black women in these novels have are not fraught with the insurmountable social opposition of the black/white relationships, which points to an idea of relationships between blacks and whites as fundamentally difficult. The options that these two
novels provide show a different way of dealing with racial difference that provides social commentary and all the drama of transgressive love without making race the primary problem. The other novels seem to say that this ideal is impossible in a relationship between a white man and a black woman.
CHAPTER II. THE FAIRY TALE PRINCE AND THE RELUCTANT HEROINE

Because of the political implications of the racial difference and the specific time period in which most of these novels were written, the novels most frequently present a white hero who is a sensitive, emotional man (reminiscent of the New Man of the early 1990s) and a black heroine who is a strong, self-assured woman but who is less emotionally open than the hero. The novels present a type of hero/heroine dynamic that is sometimes found in other novels, but what is striking is that there are few exceptions to this dynamic among the novels that feature white men with black women.

This is largely due to the ramifications of the racial politics, which make the standard romance novel clichés of strong, stoic, domineering heroes unwelcome in this context. Because the strong, competent black heroines resemble many of the contemporary white heroines in category romances, the softness of the heroes is highlighted. The heroes in these novels are supplicants: they pursue the heroines in a non-confrontational manner, rather than ordering them around.

The rake and the gothic novel hero are among the hero prototypes most often discussed in studies of romance novels (especially those studies done in the early 1980s, with a psychoanalytic approach) but they do not appear in these novels, and it is clear that they would be unwelcome. Because the novels are post-Mythopoetic Men’s Movement, and post-Culture Wars, the template for acceptable, attractive masculinity is one that is necessarily softer than the stereotype of the rake. While the standard romance novel heroes are not necessarily hypermasculine, at least not in the sense of the Sylvester Stallone/Arnold Schwarzenegger action hero template of the 1980s, they do occupy a type of masculinity that is clearly about
maintaining dominance over career and relationship. The traditional romance novel hero is successful because he is forceful, and he wins the heroine because his toughness tells her both that he can protect her and that her strength in domesticating him is a triumph.

Daphne Clair argues that readers do not want a “Tom Selleck nice-guy jogging hero” (Clair 70). Rather they want a hero who is dramatic and dangerous, and provides an authentic challenge to the heroine, because of her need to tame him. But this is not a trope that can work well in interracial romance novels with black heroines and white heroes, precisely because of the cultural baggage that the race factor carries with it. The heroes of most of the novels in this study are closer to the ideal of the 1990s hero who is strong enough to show his sensitive side. There is no impulse to conquer coming from either party, and the emphasis is not on establishing equity, as the assumption is that a healthy relationship will already have it.

Only one of the novels I studied presented an authoritarian hero: Gwynne Forster’s *Against the Wind*. Rather than presenting a hero who does not need to be overcome, Forster provides one who, while he is just as devoted as the heroes of other novels, slips into an authoritarian attitude on occasion.

Forster’s hero is what Jay Dixon describes as the “father-hero.” In her discussion of Mills & Boon novels, Dixon linked this need for a controlling male presence to a post-World War I British desire for stability (Dixon 70), but the formula is a common one that is often used in the more traditional lines of category romances to convey a sense that the hero is strong enough to adequately take care of the heroine in peril. In *Against the Wind*, Forster creates a hero who sees no problem in asserting his power over the heroine, despite the fact that the whole reason the heroine is in the hero’s home is to protect herself from the man who is stalking her, and thus attempting to assert power over her.
When Leslie, the heroine, attempts to return to her home and regain some of the independence she feels she has lost by getting involved with Jordan, the hero, she is attacked in her apartment. Upon rescuing her, Jordan tells her that he is exerting control over her life:

“I’m taking you where you belong, where I can take care of you, protect you, where you should have been all along. I know you love this apartment, but I have to know you’re safe and that you’re not afraid. From now on, you stay at the house with the rest of the family. Tomorrow, we’ll move your things. You may come over here and work on your thesis or whenever you feel the need for privacy, but you’ll live under my roof.” (Forster 147)

Rather than objecting to these orders, Leslie accepts them and the power this allows the hero to wield.

As the discourse surrounding interracial relationships in these novels often touches on recreating the power dynamics of slavery, with the central problem focusing on “giving for free what’s been taken by force” (Kitt, *The Color of Love*, 275), it is important to note that *Against the Wind* does not link the hero’s comments to an idea of domination of black women. The domination here, and it is never characterized as such, is personal and particular to the character and the situation. If the author were to link this power dynamic to the races of the characters she would be stating that the question of a racialized power differential is a valid one. It is entirely acceptable in a traditional romance for the hero to take control of the situation because a man who wants to protect his woman is seen as strong rather than domineering. However, were the hero to articulate this power as needed because of the racial difference, it would render valid the other characters’ objections to the romance.
Doreen Owens Malek’s discussion of the romantic movie *Harem* illustrates the way that
the domineering nature of the hero in the traditional romance is managed and made palatable for
the audience:

[The hero] is fighting his conquest by the heroine fiercely. Captivated by her
intelligence, her integrity, and the courage she displayed even while she was
physically powerless, as well as by her beauty, he has already been vanquished
emotionally, but won’t admit he loves her. Our heroine, resigned, is about to
board the train to go home with her boring fiancé…As the passengers stand
transfixed, [the hero] rides straight to the feet of our heroine, impales her with his
burning dark gaze and says, “What do I have to do to make you stay?”
(Malek 77)

This fantasy appeals to the audience, Malek argues, “not only because love has triumphed, but
because he has capitulated and she has *won*. He’s willing, finally and at the very last minute and
after much resistance, to do anything to keep her with him.” (Malek 77, emphasis Malek’s)

By presenting heroes as soft and giving, authors sidestep the issue of domination, which
is a salient point in these novels. The fear that is often expressed by the heroine and her family
and friends is that becoming romantically involved with a white man would recreate a
master/slave dynamic. In Dorianne Cole’s *Once In A Blue Moon* (2002), the heroine, Denise, is
confronted by her sister about her relationship with the hero. Denise’s sister tells her that her
relationship with a black man is inherently better than Denise’s relationship with a white man
because her husband’s “people never enslaved my people!” (Cole 384). She proceeds to ask
Denise if she needs money or is in trouble, because it is clearly the only reason she can imagine
for her sister to willingly be with a white man.
Another fear brought up in the books is that the hero only wants to be with the heroine to have an exotic sexual experience. The authors frequently have the family and friends of the heroine communicate this fear. In Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love* the heroine’s sister tells her that when the hero looks at her, all he sees is, “a pretty black woman. She’s available. And she can be had. Some white dude out there… is not going to look at us and see us.” (Kitt, 274) By voicing the fear that the white hero can never actually understand or want to be with a black woman, the novels set up a problem to be solved: that of the hero proving his love to the heroine, despite the objections. The heroine is not the aggressor in these novels, and she cannot be, because that would validate the argument that black women who want to be with white men are fooling themselves into believing that a relationship is possible.

This argument may have a particular resonance for the target audience of the novels, as the objections the families raise in these books are standard objections in the black community to black women dating white men. The constant refrain in the novels of, “do you think you’re too good for black men?” and “he can never love you the way a black man can,” are common enough that it is not surprising to see the black characters depicted as raising these questions. This has the added effect of making the heroine’s family seem, while wrong, not particularly irrational. The objections are so routine and almost clichéd that the authors do not have to have the heroines spend much time defending against them. It would be almost more shocking if the heroine’s family did not raise any of these issues.

As the problem of the novel is neither the heroine’s attempt to tame the hero nor a struggle to justify her relationship to her family, the central conflict must come from some other source, and in these novels, it is most often racism. The hero is depicted as the problem-solver who can make racism seem less important, even though he may not vanquish it entirely, leaving
the characters free to pursue the relationship. The character of racism in these novels is necessarily less dangerous than it might be in real life, because it is a problem that must be solvable.

Most often, the racism that the characters face is based in attitudes expressed by other characters, rather than physical danger. The reactions the characters face are relatively serious, as evidenced by *Once in a Blue Moon* in which the heroine’s sister’s stroke is attributed to the shock of seeing her with a white man and *Shades of Desire* in which the heroine’s sister-in-law “gave a little scream, then covered her mouth with her hand” upon meeting the white boyfriend (White 91). However, none of the characters face Klansmen or burning crosses. None of them lose jobs or have to leave town because of their relationships. The negative attitudes they face are always resolved by the end of the book either by the characters who are opposed to the relationship learning to accept it, or the hero and heroine deciding to ignore the opposition.

Often the specter of racism is the problem, with the heroine’s family discussing their suffering at the hands of racists, even though the heroine has never experienced anything as difficult as her family has. In Lisa Riley’s *At Last*, the heroine’s family provides descriptions of their hardships as a way to convince the heroine that her choice is flawed. After Caroline, the heroine, argues with her family about her new boyfriend, her grandmother tells her a story about the racism that Caroline’s uncle has faced.

“I seem to recall hearing a story about your uncle being terrorized as a boy in Mississippi by a group of white boys. They caught him alone once when he was about 16 and they beat him so badly that he had to hospitalized.” (Riley 176) The kind of racism that the heroine and hero face is never this serious, but the possibility and memory of it are communicated as valid reasons for the heroine’s family to oppose the
relationship. The authors depict racism as a reality that people must face, but they are careful to show that it should not prevent the hero and heroine from being together.

The problem with this careful depiction of racism that is always overcome is that the authors make an argument that racism will always be the primary fear that an interracial couple must conquer. Only rarely do the novels posit a problem for the couple that is not based in race. By making this problem the most important one, the authors validate the fears that their characters say are unimportant.

In Karyn Langhorne’s *A Personal Matter*, the heroine notices her own shifting attitude towards her relationship, while gaining an understanding of the type of racism she will have to face. Sitting at a restaurant, she notices that two white women behind her are talking about a couple of kids she sees walking together:

“Alayna had to take another look at the kids before she caught it: the young woman was black, the young man, white. Funny. It was the kind of difference she usually noticed before anyone else in the room, but she hadn’t. Not this time. They were just too alike for it to make much difference.” (Langhorne 166)

Upon hearing the bigoted women describe their disgust at the idea of an interracial relationship, Alayna realizes that her problems with the idea of dating a white man have started to fade. The nature of the racism in this novel is characteristic of the way it is depicted in other novels: never dangerous, more annoying than anything else. The author makes clear the fact that Alayna can overcome her own problem with the relationship by depicting her amusement at the problems the two women have with a white boy dating a black girl.

The publisher and the imprint of the novel are important in determining the level of severity in the depiction of racism. Books published by category romance publishers such as
Indigo Love Spectrum, Harlequin, and Silhouette have much softer depictions of racist language than the novels that are published as general fiction or “chick lit.”

In Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love*, published by Signet and not as a category romance, the hero first faces the problem of racism when he goes to see an old girlfriend soon after he has started casually dating the heroine. In his car, he and the former girlfriend have this exchange:

“Peggy, what’s going on? What is the matter with you?”

“You have some goddamn nerve, Jason, calling me for a date now.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t call you,” he shouted impatiently.

“I’m talking about your black girlfriend, that’s what. How dare you screw some nigger tramp and then expect me to go out with you?”

Jason was stunned. His mouth dropped open and he struggled for words. “She’s – she’s an artist. Leah is …” he said, trying to make sense of what was going on.

“What the hell difference does that make? She’s probably been in and out of more beds than you can count. What if she’s got AIDS? What if she infected you?”

Jason just stared at her. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was this the same woman he’d known for almost three years, saying these things, suggesting these things?

“She’s not a tramp,” he responded tightly.

“She’s black and you’re fucking her. What do you think that makes her?” Peggy ranted. (Kitt, *The Color of Love*, 265-266)
The ability to portray truly vitriolic racism gives the non-category romance novels more of a base from which to argue that the racism the couple faces is truly daunting and ought to be the major conflict of the novel.

Additionally, the relaxed standards for acceptable plot points and language allow for the objections of friends and family to be far more pointed than those depicted in category romance novels. In Lori Bryant-Woolridge’s *Hitts and Mrs.* (2004), the heroine, Melanie, has an argument with her best friend when she reveals who she has been having a relationship with:

“It’s John Carlson.”

“That white boy you work with? What about Will? Why do you continue to dog that man? How much more humiliation are you going to put him through?”

“Just a minute ago you had no problem with me having Will and a married man on the side. Now it’s an issue because you find out it’s John? Why?”

“Because white men don’t love black women. They may be curious about us and our supposed wild and promiscuous ways, but they don’t love us. To them we’re an anomaly. A curiosity fuck. They simply want to take us to bed so they can earn their zebra stripes and brag to their friends. They screw us and leave because they don’t think we’re good enough for them to stay.”

“Why do you hate white men so much?”

“Because they’re nothing but heartless cowards, a lesson I learned firsthand during my freshman year at Hampton. The first time I fell in love it was with my English lit professor. I thought he was the finest man – black or white – I’d ever seen and I loved everything about him. He said he loved me too – enough to
screw me every chance he had until I got pregnant. Then he pretended he didn’t know my name.” (Bryant-Woolridge 296-297)

Bryant-Woolridge makes explicit exactly what the other novels are alluding to when they have characters make comments such as, “he just wants to have an exotic experience.” The ability to be blunt that is offered by not publishing through a category romance house makes the problems that the characters face more intelligible as significant impediments.

Even within the restrictions of category romance publishers, there are ways to present racism as a factor that is truly worrisome. Often the “other man” figure is the source of the problems for the couple. The disapproving black man who is worried for the heroine is someone who can voice the opinions of other people that the couple might encounter. Sometimes the disapproval comes from another suitor, but it is occasionally voiced by the heroine’s father or brother.

In Langhorne’s novel, this other man is described by the heroine as thinking that he is “Protector of Negro Women Everywhere,” (Langhorne 158) and the character is quick to judge her for her decision to be with the hero: “You’re black, Alayna. In case you’d forgotten it…You can’t be bothered with a decent brother who works for a living. No. You gotta cross the color line… playing darky to his Massa Overseer--” He argues that her relationship with the hero is a sign that she is trying to “abandon the black man. Your brother in the struggle.” (Langhorne 284-285)

By presenting an argument that the heroine’s personal relationship jeopardizes the political welfare of all black people everywhere, the author enables the heroine to easily dismiss the degree of seriousness of the disapproval while still seeing the point about the political questions her relationship raises. It is clear that she is aware of and concerned by the racial
difference, but the overblown arguments of the opposition render her position more understandable.

The role of the hero’s parents is often important in understanding the character of the hero and the nature of the novel’s stance on racism. The parents are usually either perfectly accepting civil rights activists or budding Klansmen. The wide spectrum with little middle ground works as a plot device: the parents are either explained away as no problem at all, or they are the central problem.

In one case, Clark’s *A Twist of Fate*, the racist attitude of the hero’s mother is explained away as self-hatred, which serves to depict racism as solvable. In Dar Tomlinson’s *A Risk of Rain*, the hero’s family is the central problem, with the hero’s grandfather having orchestrated the breakup of the couple’s marriage. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that the grandfather was motivated by an old rivalry, not necessarily racism, rendering the question of race unimportant. The authors seem reluctant to depict the hero’s family as explicitly racist in a way that cannot be resolved, not just because the problem must be solved by the end of the novel, but also because of what it would say about the hero. The heroine’s family can have reservations, but they are usually based in experience of racist white people: they are always couched in terms of not being able to judge the hero on his own merits, after a lifetime of suffering at the hands of bigots. The heroine’s family is understandable in their objections, even though their objections are never based in direct experience with the admirable hero.

Those family members who do not have problems with the relationship are depicted as being sources of strength for the hero. *Shades of Desire, Once in a Blue Moon*, and *A Personal Matter* all feature parental figures who are overjoyed at their son’s choice, showing the reader that the heroine has nothing to worry about with the hero. The implication is that if the hero
came from such a loving, understanding family, then he can be taken seriously in his pursuit of the heroine. There is a way in which the hero’s family is sometimes depicted as being overly accepting, which can make the heroine seem a little ridiculous in her worry about the racism of white people she encounters.

The shared past storyline offers a more extreme way to show the problem of the reluctant heroine because those stories often depict the heroine as someone who actually broke up with the hero because of the societal pressures. Barbara Gale’s *Picking Up The Pieces* (2005) is a good example of this because the heroine has actually done exactly what the other heroines say they should do: she married a rich, successful black man. In the formula of romance novels, this is a ticket to good fortune. However, the heroine finds that none of the ideas of what would be right for her are accurate, because she married (and then had to divorce) the wrong partner. The novel does not portray this “wrong partner” as someone who is inherently bad, and the relationship is not depicted as one the heroine would need to get out of to show that she is strong and plucky. Rather, the other man is a good person, who is just not right for the heroine. The heroine does eventually choose someone else who is good, kind, and successful. The author communicates that this hero is right for her because of his persistence and desire to be with her despite the societal pressures encountered due to their racial difference, making their love deeper and more significant than what she had with the person who was only superficially right for her. In keeping with the theme of transgressive love, the heroine has to choose the person who is right for her regardless of the opinions of the society.

By casting the relationship in this light, the author argues that the heroine needed to learn that love conquers all. She first married the partner who appeared to be right for her rather than the one who actually is, and she was proven wrong for that. She still has the fear that no one will
understand her choice, exacerbated by the fact that she is a high-profile figure and thus she must directly deal with what society has to say about her relationship. However, in choosing the relationship that society frowns upon, she shows that she is strong enough to withstand society’s approbation and emotionally intelligent enough to know which relationship is the best.

By making the heroine’s changed attitude toward race the primary object of these stories, the novels manage to both acknowledge racism and depict a hero who is above it all. As the reader sees the action primarily through the heroine’s eyes, the heroine must carry all the realistic hesitation that the reader might have in a similar situation. This allows for a less realistic hero, one who is motivated primarily by his ideals. Positioning the heroine’s fears as the main problem in the narrative gives the hero a dragon to slay: as soon as he allays the fears of the heroine, he has solved the entire conflict of the novel and cleared the way for the relationship to continue. The reader, who may have reservations that are similar to the heroine’s, is offered a hero sensitive and persistent enough to render all objections unimportant.
CHAPTER III. SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS AND THE LEVELING FACTOR

For much of the history of the category romance novel, the template for the characters was the “nineteen-year-old virgin helplessly submits to powerful thirty-something Greek tycoon” (Margolis 130), often with the added complicating factor (for the heroine) of relative poverty. As Jan Cohn argues in *Romance and the Erotics of Property*, the pennilessness of the heroine is often used in romance novels to provide a site for reward: if the heroine is virtuous but poor, the hero’s wealth will serve as a prize that she has earned by being herself. While this formula continues to change, with many romance novel heroines being depicted as self-sufficient and ambitious, there are still many novels that reward the heroine with the hero’s riches. None of the novels in this study that have a white hero and black heroine do so.

Many of the heroines in interracial romance novels are not only able to take care of themselves, but are relatively well-off, if not just as rich as the heroes. They are almost all well-educated, with many discussing their desire to have more education, a goal that is always lauded by the hero. While this could be seen as being a nod to the growing economic power of women, it also effectively circumvents one of the arguments against interracial relationships that many of the characters in the novels express: that the only reason a black woman would want to be with a white man is for his money.

Whiteness is explicitly linked with privilege in many of the novels, and the implication could be that the heroines are attempting to access privilege through their relationships with the heroes, a trait that is universally seen as proof of bad character in romance novels (Cohn 132). The increased economic power of the black heroines allows the reader to see that the heroine has
nothing to gain from the relationship except love, which effectively eliminates at least one of the objections to the relationship.

Giving the heroines economic power emphasizes the problem of racial difference as the only salient issue to be overcome. By removing any other source of external problems for the hero and heroine, the authors reiterate the viewpoint that race is the most important aspect of difference between them.

In Barbara Gale’s *Picking Up The Pieces* (2005), the black heroine, Althea Almott, is a rich supermodel. She reunites with her former love, Harry Bensen, a rich white photographer. The novel presents many instances in which Althea is shown as being uncomfortable with her fame and using her wealth to escape the paparazzi. Both Althea and Harry are able to go where they want to and take whichever jobs they choose, regardless of the monetary impact. By portraying the characters as wealthy, the question of who benefits economically from the relationship is entirely removed.

The implications of having a black heroine who is wealthy can most effectively be seen by contrasting the characterization of Althea in *Picking Up the Pieces* with her characterization in one of Gale’s earlier novels, *The Ambassador’s Vow* (2002). The novels share two lead characters: Daniel Boylan, a black man who is the first African-American ambassador to France, and Althea Almott. Prior to the start of both novels Althea and Daniel marry and subsequently divorce. The first novel follows the formula of the average category romance: a domineering hero and a nurturing heroine, who are brought back together after a misunderstanding. It is also the only novel in this study that features a white heroine (Katherine)/black hero (Daniel) pairing. The second novel follows the same plotline as the first one, but incorporates many of the tropes already discussed as generic conventions of the black woman/white man romance novel.
Looking at the two novels together provides insight into how the characters had to be changed to fit into the racial dynamics of the emerging category of interracial romance novels, regardless of their previous characterization. This is especially clear in the depiction of the black heroine, Althea.

In *The Ambassador’s Vow*, Daniel, the black hero, has recently come back into contact with an ex-girlfriend (Katherine, the white heroine) who, unbeknownst to him, was pregnant with his child at the time of his marriage to another woman (Althea), all of which occurs nine years before the start of the novel. Katherine is long-suffering and nurturing. She is poor, while Daniel is rich and famous, but she only contacts him because she needs help with their son, not because of his money and fame. Althea, Daniel’s ex-wife, is explicitly coded as being interested in Daniel only for his money. Daniel often discusses how he felt pressured into marrying her.

By showing Daniel as a good man who feels lonely and betrayed, Althea’s motives are called into question. In a detailed paparazzi scene (Gale, *Vow* 89) Gale depicts Althea as being charmed by the attention of the press and clinging to Daniel’s arm, despite his discomfort. Katherine exists in the background, without access to either the man or the power that Althea has. In a later scene, set years after Daniel and Althea have divorced, Daniel makes it clear that Althea tricked him into marriage by lying about being pregnant. (Gale, *Vow* 105) While this is an important point for plot development, it sets up an interesting dichotomy between the two women.

In *Vow*, the reader sees Katherine, the nurturing heroine, contrasted with Althea, the cold, rich supermodel. The descriptions of Althea always revolve around her desire for money and fame, and they emphasize her interest in having the press follow her and Daniel around. Katherine, by contrast, wants none of the limelight, feels uncomfortable with Daniel’s fame, and
retreats into playing music and baking. As Mussell notes in her discussion of the “other woman”
trope, and as Dixon reiterates in her study of Mills & Boon novels, the interest in money and
power is a clear indication to the reader that the other woman is wrong for the hero. Regardless
of how much the hero may want money and power, a good heroine simply wants to be loved and
given children. Both Katherine and Althea exemplify these roles, and the choice that Daniel
must make is clear to the reader.

In *Vow*, the idea of interracial relationships is brought up before we see the hero enter
into one, with the introduction of Henry, a white man who marries Daniel’s sister, Deirdre.
(Gale, *Vow* 35) Gale uses this plot point to show the audience how Daniel feels about interracial
relationships. In seeing how he reacts from an outside point of view, the audience can then learn
how he would react when the situation involves his life and reputation. Daniel is depicted as
being enraged by the idea of his sister marrying a white man, but as he gets to know his brother-
in-law, he becomes more comfortable with the idea of the relationship. As the novel’s main
story involves his relationship with a white woman, it is necessary to show that he can change his
attitude, but that the problem is there from the beginning.

Daniel is the gothic hero: he fits the archetype of the rake perfectly. He is rich and
successful, and he has no problem telling the heroine what to do. He rages about women lying to
him and insults the heroine’s integrity. This behavior is depicted as being completely acceptable.
Throughout it all, Katherine knows that she wants Daniel and she fights to tame him, which
many theorists have described as the ultimate goal of the heroine in a category romance novel.
*Vow* is a traditional romance in that the heroine and the hero are adversaries, and it is the
heroine’s job to make sure that their relationship does not end that way.
By contrast, *Picking Up The Pieces*, written only three years later and using many of the same characters, offers an entirely different approach to the question of the adversarial relationship. The Althea we meet in *Vow* is described as being primarily interested in money. She traps the hero into marriage by lying about a pregnancy and she leaves him when the thrill of being an ambassador’s wife is gone. The Althea that shows up in *Pieces* is a drastically different person, not just because her actions are explained from her point of view and not her ex-husband’s, but because she is an entirely different character with the same name and background. The relationship between Daniel and Althea is shown as being one of misunderstanding and not malice. Althea is crushed by the end of their relationship, and we learn that she only married Daniel after being afraid of staying in a relationship with her hero, Harry.

At this point, the novel follows much the same plotline as the others studied: the heroine has reservations about the interracial relationship with Harry, he continues to pursue her, she learns that love is more important than society’s racial issues, and they live happily ever after. To accomplish this, the character of Althea is changed entirely from the previous novel. In one memorable scene, Althea, who was depicted in the earlier novel as a gold-digging supermodel, tells Harry that she cannot accept an expensive gift from him. “You’ll share my bed, but you won’t wear my ring?” he asks her (*Pieces* 123). The contortion of Althea’s character is necessary because the novel only works if Harry is waiting for her to come to accept the relationship. A heroine like the character Althea was in *Vow* would be undeserving of the hero. To make the relationship between the characters work in the later novel, the heroine has to retain her wealth, but not be obsessed with it. The standards for white heroines and black heroines appear to be very different. Both novels provide heroines who do not want to gain economically
from their relationships, but Althea’s wealth in the later novel positions her as someone who in fact will not gain from the relationship.

Similarly, the hero and heroine in Lisa G. Riley’s *Caught Up in the Rapture* (2004) are from the same social milieu, even though their races are different. The heroine’s best friend is surprised to learn that the heroine does not recognize the hero since they have moved in the same social circles from the time they were children. The heroine’s father has played golf with the hero’s father for decades, and most of their friends know each other. In every way possible, Riley makes it clear that the hero and heroine are socially equal, with the heroine’s mother’s insistence on the heroine marrying a light-skinned black man the only social obstacle between them. The heroine explains to the hero,

“My mother never allowed me to go to parties where there would be white people. She didn’t want to take the chance that I might mix and mingle with unsuitables, as she called you guys. I only went to the parties put on by black society organizations and to Mother, even that was risky, because by that time, dark-skinned people had long been allowed in.” (Riley 118)

The novel describes the parallel high society organizations that black and white communities have and the author allows them to overlap in order to give the hero and heroine the same wealthy background.

In *At Last*, *Once in a Blue Moon*, *The Color of Love*, *A Twist of Fate*, *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh*, and *Shades of Desire*, the heroines are all from affluent families, often more affluent than those of the heroes. In *The Color Line*, *A Personal Matter*, *Hitts and Mrs.*, and *Under the Gun* the heroines meet the heroes in some professional capacity, and the first conflict to overcome is the impropriety of a workplace romance.
Education is also used to equalize the social status of the characters. In *A Personal Matter* the heroine is a paralegal planning to go to law school, something that the hero supports by offering her a partnership in the law firm he is opening. *Against the Wind* offers a heroine who is most concerned with getting her MBA, a goal the hero wholeheartedly supports.

By creating heroines who have interests outside of finding and keeping a husband, the authors not only offer more well-rounded characters, they offer characters who will only gain emotional rewards from the relationship with the hero. The question of what a black woman could possibly want from a white man, a question that many of the secondary characters ask, is never directly answered, but the emphasis on the heroines’ self-sufficiency makes it clear that the goal is not monetary.

A political aspect that is not confronted in the novels is that this emphasis on black women as economically successful renders unimportant any questions of what benefits whiteness confers. The reader is not given a place to question whiteness and white privilege because whiteness confers little privilege in these novels. As much as the characters question overt, personalized racism, the issue of systemic racism is never raised.
CHAPTER IV: THE FEAR OF INTERRACIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE PRESERVATION OF RACIAL STATUS

In *White*, Richard Dyer states that “inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body… if white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the ‘natural’ basis of their dominion is no longer credible.” (Dyer 25)

The novels in this study directly confront this possibility, using children to argue for a breakdown of racial differences.

Beverly Clark’s *A Twist of Fate* is predicated on the possibility of unintentional “dilution” of the white race. The setup of the novel is that, due to a fertility clinic mistake, Camille King, a black woman, is inseminated with the sperm of a white man, Nicholas Cardoneaux, rather than that of her dead husband.

The hero shows himself to be someone the audience can sympathize with because he immediately decides that he wants the baby. He decides that “it should be a simple thing convincing Camille King to give him custody of the baby,” (Clark 15) because of her lack of husband. By making Nicholas a strong father figure, the novel argues that he is worthy of the heroine. He is confronted with the possibility of children who, according to the other characters, will never fit in anywhere because of their mixed racial heritage, and yet he decides that his desire for children can overcome that.

The reason for Nicholas’ mother’s issues with the relationship are explained in the end of the novel, with her explanation that she is passing for white, having been raised by her white aunt and uncle after her “3/4” black mother died. The revelation that Nicholas’ mother is...
passing is not used to contest the whiteness of the children, as it is in other novels, it is rather to explain her reluctance to acknowledge her grandchildren. The contrast between Nicholas and his mother is sharply drawn. While Camille and Nicholas’ brother both show some sympathy for the woman, Nicholas feels betrayed that his mother denied her heritage. As discussed earlier, rather than taking this opportunity to position Nicholas as a black man because of his mother’s heritage, the subject of Nicholas’ race is not discussed.

By not making the characters change their perception of the hero’s race, the idea that whiteness is only conferred on those who are “pure” white is contested. Race is never even discussed in the book after the characters learn of the mother’s secret. By not contextualizing the hero as a black man, the author argues against the “one-drop rule”: although the hero does not deny his black heritage, he does not see himself as black. The dilution of whiteness is not seen as a threat to whiteness here because the purity of whiteness has been destroyed. Dyer argues that the ideology of the supremacy of whiteness is built on the idea that there is something inherently special and different in being white, but this novel allows the hero to remain white even after the reader learns of his black heritage. This allows the hero and heroine’s children to retain their categorization as being of multiple racial heritages. Were the hero to be classified as black, the children would be black.

Despite the destabilization of the purity of whiteness that the novel offers with the children, it also argues the opposite point, validating the fears of the hero’s mother by showing that she does not fit in anywhere unless she ignores one side of her racial heritage. Despite the mixed heritage of the novel’s characters, they all identify as one race or the other and never both. The novel asks that the hero and heroine’s children do what the other characters cannot, and gives no evidence that deciding to identify as both black and white is a viable option. Rather than
presenting the mixed-race characters as happy in their mixed heritage, the novel states that it is a
source of endless angst. This can be seen in the novel’s depiction of the problems of one of the
children as not looking “white enough” for the hero to see himself reflected in the child. There is
a sense that unless the children look as if they have mixed heritage, the hero cannot be assured
that the children are actually his. The need for the physical evidence of paternity reflects an idea
of race as primarily visual.

Unlike *A Twist of Fate*, other novels retain the fear of what will happen to children of an
interracial union as their salient dilemma. Possibly because *A Twist of Fate* provides mixed-race
children as a *fait accompli* it has to deal with them as romance novels tend to deal with children:
as happy, welcome surprises. When there are no children to speak of, the interracial romance
novels tend to posit their possible existence as a problem that must be resolved.

In *Once in A Blue Moon*, the trope of what a white father will think of his possible
mixed-race children is expressed at the very end. The heroine, Denise, asks:

“Ian?…What will our children be to you?”

“What will they – what will they be besides yours and mine?” He paused again.

“Are you talking about race?”

“Yes,” she answered in a small voice.

Ian gently framed her face between his hands.

“Denise, I don’t care whether our children are chocolate or vanilla or butter
pecan; whether their eyes are brown or blue… they can call themselves whatever
they want, they can be whatever they want to be. The thing that matters—the
only thing—is that they’re ours, and they know we love them. If society says
they’re black, then we prepare them for that. You know better than I about these
things; I’ll follow your lead…This is all to say that what I will see when I look at our children is you.” (Cole 478-479)

The ability to see beyond the race of the children, while still acknowledging that the children will have to deal with race, is depicted as the most desirable attitude for the hero to have. To not think about the race is to ignore reality, but to see it as anything other than a societally-imposed nuisance is to place too much importance on it.

Lisa G. Riley’s *Caught Up In The Rapture* (2004) provides a different view of the need to define the race of interracial children. It is one of the only novels in this study that deals with the issue of color-consciousness within black communities. Tracy, the heroine, has always dated dark-skinned black men because of her mother’s insistence that she only associate with light-skinned people. She explains to the hero, Jack, that there is a delineated line between being light enough to be acceptable and being white, and she was expected not to cross that line:

“My mother always harped on my being with people of my own complexion or lighter and insisted that I only date fair-skinned boys. In fact, when I was a teenager, she and her friends got together and constantly set their children up with each other. When I was old enough to realize that the whole purpose was to create fair-skinned babies to ‘preserve’ our kind, as she called it, I refused to date her choices anymore. In fact, I went in the opposite direction and only dated men darker than I am. I’d convinced myself that they were the only men I could be attracted to. And as for dating white men – no way!”

“Because that would mean satisfying your mom’s twisted need even more,” Jack guessed.

“Actually, no. Mother would have a fit if she knew I was dating you.”
“Okay, I’m confused,” Jack said.

“Mother doesn’t mind white people, but she would never want you guys in the family. It goes back to the slavery scenario. Yes, people who looked like me may have been treated better than darker slaves, but they were still not given the benefit of being fully human. They were still slaves and when they weren’t slaves, they were still treated abominably. In the eyes of the people in power, they were only slightly better than darker slaves because they were closer to looking white. Mother may not want any dark skin in the family, but she definitely wants the family to be considered black.” (Riley 118-119)

The heroine argues that the emphasis on being light-skinned and the privilege that has historically conferred in the black community is not something she wants to participate in, and she communicates this through both her choice of romantic partners and her choice of friends. The novel clearly communicates that the danger the relationship between the hero and heroine poses is due to the possible loss of status. In contrast, the hero and heroine’s best friends (who are also a black woman/white man couple) have a relationship that is shown as being completely free of the associations of purity and preservation. Although it is never stated explicitly, the reason may be that the heroine’s best friend does not have to worry about preserving status. She is always described in terms of her dark skin, including flashbacks to their childhood when the heroine’s mother forbade her to play with the other girl because she was not light-skinned enough. The novel positions preservation of blackness as something that only fair-skinned black people care about, and under that paradigm the interracial relationship between a white person and a dark-skinned black person would pose no threat.
When the hero argues to his father that the emphasis on status and preservation of skin color is ridiculous, his father states that he thinks it “could be a mistake to bring a mixed-race child into the world. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to preserve your culture, especially if you take pride in it.” When the hero argues that he is the product of two cultures, due to his American father and French mother, the father argues that, “it’s different because a mixed-race child will eventually have to choose what he wants to be. There’s usually no in-between. Society makes them choose, especially children of one black parent and one white parent.” (Riley 190-191)

Throughout the novel the question of “preservation” of one’s culture is the primary problem facing the hero and heroine. Rather than arguing that it is inherently wrong to be with someone of a different race, the objections from other characters are about maintaining one’s status by not “diluting” the culture. This makes sense in the context of the novel, because all of the characters, regardless of their skin color, are wealthy and have considerable social standing. Maintaining whiteness, or light-skinned blackness, is essential to the maintenance of their privileged identities. The emphasis on preservation of culture in this novel is clearly explained as really being about preservation of skin color. More than any of the other novels, Caught Up in the Rapture argues that the fallout of racism is a detrimental color-consciousness.

The prevailing attitude in the novels is that racial difference will be solved by the next generation. Although many of the characters in the novels are of multi-racial heritage, and the problem of race is not solved for them, there is still an emphasis on changing attitudes being an inevitable result of the passage of time. The idea that children of these unions will change everything allows the more progressive characters to shirk a certain amount of responsibility for changing hearts and minds on their own. For the characters who are opposed to change in the
social construction of racial categories, potential mixed-race children are something to be avoided because they necessitate the redefinition of terms. Children are presented as the best possible vehicle for destabilizing the concept of race.
CONCLUSION

Aliyah Burke’s *A Knight’s Vow* (2004) is unlike the other interracial romance novels in this study in that it is set in an entirely different time and place. The novel depicts the standard plucky black heroine and dashing white hero, but it places them in the context of a time travel novel set in the 13th century. The hero and heroine react to each other in much the same way that other heroes and heroines do: they are immediately attracted to each other, they try to fight the attraction, they have a battle of wills, and they eventually give in and fall in love. The similarity ends here because, while the hero is from the 13th century, the heroine is from the 21st. Placing this interracial romance in the context of the time-travel subgenre makes many of the interracial romance novel conventions either impossible or insignificant. What emerges is a story devoid of the racial politics of the other novels: there is no disapproving family to separate the characters, and the hero does not have to prove that he is politically aware enough to have a relationship with a black person. Instead, characters discuss race as a superficial difference. The hero finds the heroine exotic, but exoticism is not used in a dehumanizing way. The conflicts that the characters face are standard romance novel conflicts. The heroine tames the hero and he eventually submits to her will and happily declares that he is in love.

What this tells the reader is that one must set a story 800 years in the past in order to avoid the problem of race and the legacy of racism. The other novels in this study are all extremely concerned with racial difference, positioning it as a problem to be solved, and an issue that must be addressed as the primary problem for the characters. Race, in these novels, must be addressed at length, and once the characters have overcome the problem, the novels argue that all of their problems have been solved.
The use of many different approaches, such as making the hero progressive, making the family disapproving, delineating race as a factor that separates the characters, and leveling the playing field of class so that race is the salient issue, allow the novels to make race the most important problem to solve. Rather than using race as just one complication, the novels make it the most important factor, while simultaneously saying that it is truly unimportant. Despite the heroes’ arguments that race does not matter, the authors communicate that it in fact does.

While these novels do not tell an overtly political story, in the sense that there is little demonstrable political consciousness in the novels, and most of them are devoid of historical context, they are doing the same work that the literary novels mentioned in the introduction do: they are presenting a vision of how to solve racism. How well they succeed at this is debatable. While the solution does not include marching, protesting, or lobbying, it is a solution that is in keeping with the romance genre. The remedy for racism, these novels suggest, is romantic love. In the context of a romance novel, romantic love will always win, despite political resistance. Metatextually, this says to the audience that love can conquer all. If the audience is receptive to the interracial relationship, and if the novel offers them a way of seeing this type of relationship as normal and acceptable, perhaps the novels are doing a type of political work that is just as important as any other.
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APPENDIX . ROMANCE NOVEL RESOURCES


Amazon.com User Created Lists

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<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/listmania/list-browse/-/3SS9DOLVCT5RK/ref=cm_lm_lists/102-8937978-6987336>

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