

# Happily Ever After for Whom? Blackness and Disability in Romance Narratives

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IN THE UNITED STATES, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE OFTEN REPRESENTED as nonsexual, having either no desire or no capacity for sexual interactions. This stereotype is supported by both the lack of mainstream representation and by the historical denial and punishment of the sexualities of people with disabilities through eugenics, forced sterilization, institutionalization, exclusion from sex education, and more (Wilkerson 193–94; Stevens 6–11). In contrast, the sexuality of black people has been abundantly represented as a problem that needs to be controlled. Black feminists argue that sexuality and gender are always already racialized, and sexual-racial stereotypes, like the Jezebel, dominate contemporary cultural representations of black women. While the sexualities of black people have been more often represented than the sexualities of disabled people, these representations have typically been oppressive nonetheless.

Positive, perhaps even liberatory, scripts of black and disabled people's sexualities are largely nonexistent, especially in mainstream culture. As a result, writers of popular fiction have sought to depict black and disabled people's experiences in the popular romance genre. Harlequin, the most recognizable of romance novel publishers, has a fairly robust line of African-American romance novels that are published separately under a different imprint called Kimani romance—a strategy common in romance fiction publishing.<sup>1</sup> While there is no exclusive line of disability romance novels from any publisher, in 2010, the *Romantic Times Book Reviews* labeled disabled heroes and heroines a “hot trend” in romance fiction and Emily M. Baldys noted “the romance genre’s growing obsession with disability” (Fielding

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and Alward; Baldys 126). These black and disabled romance narratives are often lauded for challenging the absence of both groups in the genre. At the same time such inclusive narratives reveal the limits and possibilities for addressing and representing multiply marginalized subjects, such as the black disabled people who live at the intersection of these two categories. Popular romance narratives have traditionally excluded black, disabled, and black disabled people as romantic subjects, but contemporary popular fiction that incorporates black disabled characters in romantic relationships exposes much about the mutually constitutive relationship of race, (dis)ability,<sup>2</sup> gender, and sexuality norms.

In *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, Eric Murphy Selinger and Sarah S.G. Frantz write that “popular romance scholarship has rarely attended in any detail to individual novelists, let alone individual novels” (6). Following the suggestions of early popular fiction scholars to approach romance narratives as an art form that takes varied approaches to similar formulas and themes, Selinger and Frantz express a desire for scholars to “work on the interplay between convention and innovation in specific romance novels. . . reading them at once within and against the traditions and possibilities” of their genre (6). Close readings of specific black disabled protagonists in romance novels are therefore useful in understanding how texts work both within and against the figurations of race, (dis)ability, gender, and sexuality that undergird the genre, and in doing so such readings speak to larger issues in the popular representation of black, disabled, and black disabled populations.

## Representations of Romance

Romance novels have historically constrained the representational possibilities for marginalized populations through conventions that typically exclude certain bodyminds,<sup>3</sup> behaviors, and identities. Romance narratives, by definition from the Romance Writers of America, must have a love story as the central plotline and a happily-ever-after outcome (Cheyne 38). Romance narratives often include complicated storylines about the various internal and external forces that keep the lovers from knowing, confessing, or acting upon their love (Cheyne 38). Popular romance narratives tend to be heterosexual,

have been criticized for being formulaic, cheesy, and sexist, and are often derisively referred to as “chick lit” (Cheyne 38, 40; Baldys 128, 139). These critiques have been nuanced in popular romance studies scholarship, which seeks to understand the appeal and potential of this lucrative mainstream genre. Recent scholarship on romance narratives, for example, explores how these texts hold important potential for individuals historically excluded from the genre while also interrogating the social, literary, and market structures that facilitate such exclusion.

Ria Cheyne argues “that romances with disabled protagonists offer significant opportunities to challenge negative stereotypes around disability,” because such work “positions all disabled characters as potential romantic actants, and encourages readers to reflect critically upon how they conceptualize disability and the values they attach to it” (37–38). Cheyne asserts that the benefit of such representation is twofold: first, that disabled people are represented as sexually and romantically involved, and second, that through romantic relationships characters are represented as part of a larger community, rather than as isolated figures out of the public eye. Similarly, Angelo Rich Robinson argues that through romance narratives African Americans can reclaim the humanity previously denied black subjects in slavery by representing black people exercising the freedom to choose sexual and romantic partners, get married, and raise children (40–42). Romance narratives have a long history within the African-American literary tradition. Early African-American romance narratives focused on chaste marriage plots in the name of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Belinda Edmondson, however, notes that contemporary black romance narratives include expressions of black eroticism, though they still operate within the socially acceptable mores of monogamous, heterosexual, intraracial love and romance, and often showcase black social mobility and economic success (Edmondson 202–03, 207). Escaping this context is difficult even for more nontraditional romance narratives such as black gay romance novels, which, Marlon B. Ross argues, “adapt rather rigid mass romance formulae” and typically adhere to “the rule that true love can be manifested only in the heteronormalizing coupling convention” (676, 680).

Black and disabled characters exist in romance narratives to challenge previous oppressive representations, though the representation of marginalized groups within the genre is limited. In her analysis of

disabled characters in romance novels, Baldys argues, “While these novels do not deny disabled people sexual subjectivity, they do strictly limit the kinds of (heterosexual, marriage-oriented) romantic options available to disabled characters. They also showcase ableist commonalities in their deployment of narrative strategies that serve to downplay, reinscribe, and rehabilitate disability” (130). In her discussion of Disney princess films, Rebecca Wanzo writes that “placing people of color into western fairy tale frameworks inevitably reveals historical erasures that must take place to construct fantasy”—as when the history of Pocahontas was rewritten to fit the princess fairy tale film (6). Wanzo insists that we must acknowledge “the challenges of fitting black people into generic fantasies” and recognize that “some language and stories, some signs and symbols are so ineradicably white that an African-American frame cannot fit comfortably into the ‘unreal estate,’ which is the U.S. romantic imagination” (4, 6). The structures of the romance genre—which rely upon white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual norms of social mobility and citizenship through the marriage union—make a nonstereotypical and nondiscriminatory inclusion of black and disabled people quite difficult, since social mobility, rights of citizenship, and marriage are still actively denied to black and disabled people.

In regard to mainstream representations of blackness, Wanzo writes that “the history of black representation is so overrun with negative stereotypes it can be difficult to produce a narrative that does not gesture to some racist history” (4). A similar histories of contradictory and oppressive representations exist with regard to other people of color, people with disabilities, women, and sexual minorities that also create difficulty in producing narratives about these groups that are not, in some way, racist, ableist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic. The incorporation of multiply marginalized populations, such as black disabled people, into the romance narrative genre, therefore, is even more difficult due to the contradictory and intersectional nature of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality norms.

When reading from an intersectional perspective in which (dis)ability, race, gender, sexuality, and class all represent potential analytics, there are many ways in which subversion of one norm may result in adherence to another. This applies both within and across groups. For example, one stereotype of disability is the plucky disabled character who “overcomes” their disability. If an author is

attempting to resist this stereotype, they might choose to represent a disabled character as wry, sarcastic, or even downright mean, but this approach could easily fall into the trope of the disabled character who is bitter about their disability. If taken even further, an author could end up adhering to the trope of disability as an outward sign of inner evil. This example demonstrates how stereotypes of marginalized groups are often contradictory double-binds in which rejecting one stereotype can often end in adherence to another. Contradictions exist not only within identity groups, but across them as well, creating additional challenges for representing multiply marginalized characters. For instance, black people are often represented in overly sexualized ways, while people with disabilities are often depicted as nonsexual. This creates a representational double-bind when attempting to depict the sexualities of disabled black people: do we want to emphasize sexuality to resist the desexualization of people with disabilities or downplay sexuality to reject the hypersexualization of black people?<sup>5</sup> When narrative conventions of a genre—for example, the damsel in distress, a common, if not foundational trope—rely on particular racial, (dis)ability, gender, and sexuality norms, incorporating non-normative characters becomes particularly vexed. As a result, research on romance novels makes evident the ways in which a text resists certain norms and adheres to others, and traces the multiple ways in which systems of privilege and oppression mutually constitute and support each other within the genre.

## Black Disabled Romances

While there are numerous African-American romance novels and romance narratives featuring disabled white protagonists, black disabled protagonists are rare.<sup>6</sup> They can be found in some works, like Gwynne Forster's *Forbidden Temptation*, a romance novel published by Kimani Romance, the African-American imprint of Harlequin, and N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms*, a fantasy novel that won the Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award in the fantasy category. The representation of the black disabled hero in the more genre-normative narrative of *Forbidden Temptation* and that of the black disabled heroine in the more genre-bending narrative of *The Broken Kingdoms*

together help show how romance narrative conventions engage tropes and stereotypes of race, (dis)ability, gender and sexuality.

*Forbidden Temptation* features a 35-year-old black disabled veteran hero, Luther, who has a lower leg amputation and uses a prosthesis, and a 29-year-old nondisabled black heroine, Ruby. The text is narrated in third person limited omniscient, switching between Ruby's and Luther's perspectives. The characters are both upper middle class, aligning with the trend in contemporary African-American romance narratives toward equal rather than disparate class statuses. Luther and Ruby have known each other since they were children, and he has been in love with her since they were teenagers, though she has always thought of him as a brother. The story begins with the last of Ruby's three younger sisters getting married, and, during the reception, she drinks several glasses of champagne (though she does not typically drink alcohol). Ruby then comes on strongly to Luther, flirting, kissing him in the coat closet, and insisting on going home with him. When Luther tries to put her to bed in the guest room, Ruby knocks on his door to ask him to unzip her dress. She lets the dress fall to the floor in front of him, insisting she knows what she's doing, and they have sex.<sup>7</sup> In the early morning hours, Ruby wakes up and is embarrassed that she acted so brazenly; she is certain that Luther will now think less of her. She immediately gets up and goes home, leaving Luther confused and frustrated. Luther, sure that the sex was amazing, fears that Ruby finally saw his prosthetic leg and was turned off by it. This mutual misunderstanding, combined with the characters' individual stubbornness within their previously sibling-like relationship, which causes them to at times mistreat and ignore one another, forms the basis of the barrier that keeps Luther and Ruby apart throughout the novel. This is a common romance narrative convention: some challenge, misunderstanding, secret, or circumstance keeps the lovers apart so that true love can triumph—often only in the final few pages, typically in the form of marriage or a marriage proposal.

Importantly, in *Forbidden Temptation*, disability is—or is perceived by Luther to be—central to the barrier between the lovers. Although there is never an explicit indication that Ruby is turned off by Luther's prosthetic leg (at most she expresses surprise that he can dance well, skate, and swim), Luther immediately assumes that his disability is the reason she ran off after their night of passion. He

often makes statements such as, “Neither Ruby nor any other woman who’s likely to interest me will settle for a man with one leg,” and uses words like “repulse” and “repel” to describe how he assumes Ruby feels about his prosthesis (27). The text plays with the stereotype that disability is not sexy, and that it makes a person weak, less desirable, and less able to perform sexually. These stereotypes haunt Luther despite that both he and Ruby repeatedly reflect on the earth-shattering nature of their sexual encounter—as most “true-love” sex in romance narratives tends to be. To resist the nonsexual and undesirable stereotype of disability and to conform to the convention of mind-blowing sex in romance narratives, Luther performs in a very alpha-male, sexually adept fashion. In addition, he is described as having an impeccable body that generally passes as nondisabled. This common presentation of men’s bodily and sexual performance in romance narratives, however, risks the black romantic hero’s conformance to stereotypes of black men’s sexuality as hyperactive, uncontrolled, or animalistic.

One way the text combats this potential stereotype of black sexuality is by incorporating the soldier-hero trope, which also allows for a potentially more attractive rationale for making Luther a disabled character. Jayashree Kamble writes that contemporary American romance novels that use the soldier-hero figure attempt to at once laud soldiers while also questioning and indirectly critiquing “war because of the toll it takes on the hero’s body, his psyche, and his emotional relationships” (155). Several times Luther reflects on “the family he wanted so badly” and even goes so far as to admit he had “built [his] house when he still hoped for a family with Ruby” (28, 77). Although Luther does not discuss his time at war beyond reference to his accident, his disability—which is depicted as being worse, causing a limp, when he is upset—is a clear stand-in for all that he has sacrificed and lost. Kamble writes that many texts with soldier-heroes offer “love as the antidote” to the damage done by war, such as PTSD (159). Although Luther’s amputated limb cannot be cured by love, he is depicted as needing Ruby’s love to feel “whole” again. Luther’s internalized ableism, which causes him to assume that Ruby is turned off by his disability and to conceptualize himself as incomplete, is first, however, changed by Luther’s interactions with other disabled veterans at an officers’ club lounge. While this community of disabled men (no veteran women are depicted) could potentially

form the basis of a disability rights critique of many stereotypes of disability, the text instead uses both Luther's and Ruby's reactions to these men to uphold ableist ideologies of inspiration and compulsory able-bodiedness.

Luther first visits the officers' club lounge at the encouragement of another disabled veteran, Roger, who explains that the club "is one place where nobody gazes at you with a long face feeling sorry for you" (112). Although "Luther couldn't see how associating with a group of disabled men could brighten your outlook," he shows up and meets a number of men with various disabilities (113). The visit inspires Luther to invite Ruby there and to find out if she can accept him as he is, as a man with a disability. On the surface, this change seems to be quite positive: a community of disabled veterans helps another disabled veteran work through his internalized ableism to accept and love himself and to believe that others, including romantic and sexual partners, can do the same. Upon closer inspection, however, this change is primarily facilitated by ableist ideology.

In *Forbidden Temptation*, the disabled veterans of the officers' club lounge become, following David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, a collective narrative prosthesis through which Luther is inspired to stop feeling sorry for himself, recognize his capabilities, and pursue Ruby. Although narrative prostheses are typically disabled characters who further the growth and development of a nondisabled character, in this text, the disabled character of Luther changes by interacting with men who are supposedly more severely disabled than him. The text includes many such statements as: "He'd never considered it a blessing to be missing a foot and part of the leg, but in view of what he saw around him, he could damn well rejoice" and "Compared to them, he could hardly consider himself to be disabled" (115, 132). Although the text states Luther "had enjoyed being with men like himself," this pleasure does not result in coming to terms with his disability identity and internalized ableism, but rather in distancing himself from disability through a rhetoric of luck and fortune, as in Luther's statement to his friend Paul: "I look at myself, at my. . . I can't even call it a disability anymore, considering what most of those men are dealing with. I'm fortunate" (132, 135; original ellipsis).

In addition to Luther's distancing from disability, the text also takes up broader inspiration narratives, making clear that the reader, whether disabled or not, should be moved by these disabled veterans.

This point is most explicit in the conversation between Luther and Ruby after he takes her to the club. Ruby states:

They were so cheerful. If I had the handicap of some of those men, trust me I wouldn't be smiling. One guy was hurrying home to his wife. He went to the club to let his buddies know he got married last weekend. Another has married and fathered a child since he lost his right hand and a part of his arm. Luther, I am never going to complain again about anything. Imagine a man who lost both legs and can't wear a prosthesis starting an Internet business and making a good living for himself and his four children. (229)

Luther responds:

I told you that coming here these past few weeks has changed my outlook on life. I no longer consider myself disabled, Ruby. Not when I see how those men go about life as if they didn't have a handicap, accepting themselves as they are, marrying, raising families and working. I feel like genuflecting in their presence. (230)

Though Luther ostensibly takes Ruby to the club in the hopes that "she would understand that to be disabled didn't prevent a man from enjoying a fruitful life," it is clear that both romantic protagonists are inspired to feel better about their lives because they feel they are better off than the men at the club. Luther's use of the word "genuflecting" in particular evokes religious-like admiration and praise. And yet, Ruby and Luther only seem inspired because of how the disabled veterans continue to fit into the American heteronormative capitalist soldier-hero trope by working, marrying, and having children, suggesting anything else would be a form of failure (222). As a result, *Forbidden Temptation* conforms to the regular supercrip narrative that "both normalizes and others people with disabilities because although the representation shows a person with a disability doing something 'just like everyone else,' the creation of the representation is premised upon the ableist assumption that people with disabilities do not do these things and thus are not just like everyone else" (Schalk 79).

So despite the occasional, potentially political comment, such as "A lot of people can't stand being around disabled people," *Forbidden Temptation* does little to critique ableism and, in fact, encourages

readers to take up neoliberal ableist views of the disabled veterans by identifying with Luther's and Ruby's perspectives (122). The contemporary American romance narrative trope of the soldier-hero, which requires the hero to have sacrificed something for his country in order to ultimately be rewarded with love, in this case delimits the possibilities of Luther and Ruby's narrative. Luther must desire marriage and a family to fulfill the soldier-hero role, and the other disabled veterans merely serve as one-dimensional role models to show him not only that those things are possible for him, but that they are obviously achievable since the other men are more disabled and therefore, from Luther's internal ableist perspective, even less desirable than him.

*Forbidden Temptation* therefore offers a depiction of a black disabled romantic hero whose story attempts to resist certain stereotypes of sexuality for disabled, black, and black disabled people. The novel also greatly conforms to multiple romance narrative conventions, such as mind-blowing sex and a soldier-hero who seeks marriage and a family, which require particular expressions of identity and desire. This is not wholly surprising in a text published by Kimani Romance, an imprint of Harlequin. As one of the largest producers of popular romance novels, Harlequin is more likely to maintain the norm and fulfill the expectation of the average reader than to challenge conventions of the genre. *Forbidden Temptation's* author, Gwynne Forster, is similarly an author who tends to maintain more than defy the norms of the genre, publishing most of her books with Kimani Romance and Dafina Books, an African American independent press known for romance novels, street lit and inspirational fiction.

Standing in contrast to this genre-normative example of a black disabled character is N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms*. Although this book is not officially categorized as a romance novel like *Forbidden Temptation*, it has a prominent romance plot line, blending romance and fantasy so that Jemisin has more leeway in playing with romance narrative conventions. Amira Jarmakani writes that romance novels are escapist texts deeply connected to fantasy in the broad, rather than genre specific, sense of the term (904-905). Jemisin's use of the nonrealist fantasy genre is not, therefore, a contradiction or conflict, but rather a significant enhancement of the fantasy elements already embedded in the romance narrative genre. This engagement is increasingly common as evidenced by the popular sub-genre of

paranormal romance novels, represented by Harlequin's Nocturne line or the popular *Twilight* book and film series.

*The Broken Kingdoms* is the second book in Jemisin's Inheritance trilogy, which is set in a non-Earth magic-filled world with gods, godlings, demons, and mortals who all fight with and against each other for power and control. Each novel in the series has a different narrating character. The narrator of *The Broken Kingdoms* is Oree Shoth, a Maro woman artist who, though blind to light, can see magic and utilize it in her art. At various points throughout the novel, Oree addresses an unspecified "you." In this text, the groups of people have no direct correspondence to contemporary race and ethnicity categories, however, the Maro people most closely resemble black people in terms of their physical appearance and social status. Thus, Oree can be interpreted as a black woman. Midway through the narrative, it is revealed that Oree can see and use magic because she is a demon, the offspring of a mortal and a god(ing). The text follows Oree's harrowing adventure—including her romantic relationships—when she ends up in the middle of a plot to kill and overthrow the gods and godlings.

At the start of the book, Oree is not in any committed sexual or romantic relationship, and it is at first implied that she has never been in one, especially when she expresses discomfort at hearing couples kissing, explaining that she is a single woman who "can't" have that sort of interaction (10). The "can't" here could easily be read as playing into the trope of the nonsexual disabled person, suggesting Oree's inability to attract a partner as a black woman with a disability, but that potential reading is quickly dismissed when readers are after introduced to the godling Madding, Oree's exlover with whom Oree still has sexual tension and emotional connection. Obviously for there to be a romance narrative, the protagonist has to have a romantic relationship, and in this way *The Broken Kingdoms* aligns with Cheyne's argument that romance narratives bring readers into a world where disabled people love and are loved rather than are isolated and estranged.

After the introduction of Madding, Oree reveals more about her relationship history:

Apparently I am pretty. Magic is all I see, and magic tends to be beautiful, so I have no way of properly judging the mundane

myself. I have to take others' word for it. Men praise parts of me endlessly—always the parts, never the whole. They love my long legs, my graceful neck, my storm of hair, my breasts (especially my breasts). Most of the men in Shadow were Amn, so they also commented on my smooth, near-black Maro skin, even though I told them there were half a million other women in the world with the same feature. Half a million is not so many measured against the whole world, though, so that always got included in their qualified, fragmentary admiration. . . . "You're beautiful, Oree," they would whisper as they positioned and posed and polished me. "If only—" I never asked them to complete this sentence. I knew what they almost said: *if only you didn't have those eyes*. My eyes are more than blind; they are deformed. Disturbing. I would probably attract more men if I hid them, but why would I want more men? The ones I already attract never really want me. (24–25)

Oree's discussion of how men treat her suggests both fragmentation and fetishization, echoing representations of many black women's bodyminds, such as Saartjie Baartman, the woman known as the Hottentot Venus.<sup>8</sup> This passage indicates that Oree has had romantic and sexual involvement with mortal men in the past. Oree is, therefore, a black disabled woman with a sexual and romantic history, who is only currently unattached. What is interesting about Oree's discussion of her relationships with men is not, however, that she is a sexually active, blind, black woman, but that she is so keenly aware of the ways in which she is at once praised and disparaged for the externally apparent markers of her various identities. Oree is made exotic for her dark skin color and praised for her conventionally gendered features, such as long legs and prominent breasts, yet this attention is qualified by men's "if only" statements, due to her visibly disabled eyes. Oree herself does not bemoan her appearance nor does she feel complimented by men's attention to the (supposedly) unusually dark color of her skin. Neither the praise nor the unspoken criticism seems to impact Oree—though both are presented as problematic. Instead, Oree turns the critique back onto the men, especially those who cannot get over her eyes. She indicates no desire to change her bodymind or hide her disability; rather Oree suggests that such a move would only bring her more men who cannot appreciate her holistically. Oree ultimately fell in love with Madding, she claims, because of "his calm acceptance of [her] strangeness" and the way he liked her for the

“whole” not just the “parts” (79). Here and throughout the novel, Oree presents herself as a disabled black woman making active and self-aware choices about her sexual and romantic life rather than settling for just any relationship or changing to attract a partner. This refusal to change stands in stark contrast to the theme of women changing for love, which is prominent in many romance narratives, including the classic stories of Cinderella and the Little Mermaid.

As the novel progresses and Oree’s life is put in danger, readers witness her rekindling, unofficially, the relationship with Madding. This relationship is not exactly one of equals. Madding—though a godling with no actual sex or gender—presents as a man and has gender privilege that Oree does not in their society. Madding is also quite wealthy in comparison to Oree, who is lower working class. This class difference is typical for traditional white romance narratives in which a young, poor woman achieves social mobility through marital union with a wealthy man or prince, but atypical for contemporary black romance narratives in which black women are almost always represented as educated and financially successful (Edmondson 203, 206). Finally, there’s the fact that Madding is a godling with powers and abilities far beyond Oree’s. The relationship between a godling and a mortal presents similar concerns as the more frequently discussed paranormal romance relationships between vampire and human, “which often couples a vulnerable human heroine with a dangerous, physically superior and much older male vampire,” in a way that “only exacerbates the gender inequality” in romance fiction (Miller 3). Kathleen Miller, however, contends that some texts represent the relationship between male vampires and female humans not as “merely stories of submission and gendered power imbalances,” but as mutually beneficial relationships which allow for freedom and empowerment despite stark differences in privilege and power (3). *The Broken Kingdoms* also demonstrates a resistance to the stereotypical romance narrative convention of representing gender submission and inequity as romantically appealing or even necessary for romantic success, despite the differential power positions of Madding and Oree.

This resistance is first apparent when Madding takes Oree to his home to rest, heal, and hide from the authorities seeking her. Throughout this portion of the novel, set in Madding’s home, Oree battles her torn emotions, feeling at once safe and happy with Madding, but also unwilling to give up her independence and the life she

has created for herself if she should permanently remain in Madding's house under his protection. Ultimately, faced with the realization that the people seeking her are not religious authorities but a secret, dangerous group with unknown intentions, for her own safety, Oree agrees to stay with Madding and presumably be his lover again. This choice would seem to conform to the damsel in distress trope wherein a powerless, scared woman is saved by a powerful, confident man. Oree's damsel in distress is particularly stereotypical since both women and people with disability are often represented as powerless. But, this potentially stereotypical moment is short-lived, since both Oree and Madding are soon captured and imprisoned. After Madding is killed, Oree must learn to survive and escape on her own, but this moment of solitude is also temporary, since she is soon placed in a cell with "Shiny." Shiny is the nickname Oree gives the man she had sheltered back home. He turns out to be the god Itempas, temporarily imprisoned in a mortal bodymind, without his full power, as punishment from the other two gods for starting a war. Once again, Oree is placed in a potentially unequal relationship with a magical being, this time with a fallen god who can only use his full power when protecting mortals. Oree and Shiny together plot their escape and ultimately prevail after a major battle with the central villain. It takes Oree a year to recover fully from the battle, and afterward she cannot see or access magic anymore.

At the end, Oree is simply a mortal, unmagical, blind half-demon who changes her name and goes into hiding in a new town with Shiny to prevent others from knowing about or abusing her demon status. In this new town away from her old friends and old life, Oree takes up a long-term, physically intimate relationship with Shiny: they touch, share a bed, and comfort each other, but do not have sexual interactions until nearly the end of the novel. At this point, *The Broken Kingdoms* seems set to fit within the expected happily-ever-after model of romance novels, but yet again the text plays with conventions of the genre and then moves away from them. Just after Oree and Shiny finally have sex, the two other gods, who are controlling Shiny's punishment, appear to Oree and tell her that either she can force Shiny to leave or they will kill her; either way, Shiny is not allowed happiness with her during his imprisonment in the mortal realm. Oree makes the choice to tell Shiny to go, and he does so without question, immediately recognizing that she is being forced

to do it. As the novel draws to a close, a final twist is revealed. It becomes evident that the “you” Oree has been addressing throughout the entire novel is not the reader, but her unborn child. The book ends with Oree beginning her new life: single, pregnant and blind, without any magical abilities.

Throughout *The Broken Kingdoms*, Jemisin engages various conventions of the romance genre, such as power imbalances, heteronormativity, and happily-ever-after endings, while also often refusing to allow these conventions to play out fully. In part, these conventions are not allowed full expression because compliance with them would result in conforming to stereotypes, which Jemisin seems intent on avoiding with regard to Oree, the black disabled protagonist. These elements of *The Broken Kingdoms* suggest that multiply marginalized subjects such as black disabled people cannot effectively—or perhaps, non-problematically—be incorporated into traditional romance narratives. However, the text’s navigation of genre conventions and social stereotypes also indicates the promise and possibilities made available through strategic engagement and play with/in romance narratives. Jemisin’s frequent moves in and out of generic conventions make use of readers’ expectations for romance plots, only to flip the script, thereby revealing the various norms embedded in the genre’s conventions and the difficulty of maneuvering around and through such norms for multiple marginalized people.

In the end, Oree is not in any sexual relationship, and she is still disabled, now without her former ability to see magic. This ending resists the trend toward cure in some romance narratives with disabled characters as well as traditional concepts of “happily ever after” in the genre at large.<sup>9</sup> This ending is also importantly not presented as tragic or negative, but rather fairly neutral, with an undercurrent of hope as Oree addresses her unborn child and contemplates the life they might have together. Poor, unwed, disabled, black, and pregnant, Oree does not fit the mold of a conventional romance novel heroine at the end of her love journey. Does this then mean that black women cannot be romantic heroines? Does the rejection of traditional white heterosexual romance narratives require the main character to ultimately suggest the welfare queen, one of the most pernicious stereotypes of black women’s sexuality today? Would the text have been better off representing a traditional happy ending which critics have long argued suggests that women need men for completion and

happiness? Should Oree have been cured, which suggests the only life worth living is a nondisabled one? Should Oree have, just before the end of the novel, met a Maro man to love, fulfilling the black romance novel's tendency toward intraracial love, even though she and her future child are both products of inter-species love? By contemplating different endings to this romance narrative and the ways in which these alternatives might satisfy some audience members while also contradicting previous elements of the text or further complying to a different social stereotype, it is possible to further understand what Wanzo refers to as "the catch-22 of racial representation"—that is, the inability to completely escape the history of conflicting stereotypes, not only in terms of race, but also (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, and class as they each rely upon the others for articulation, particularly within the traditional conventions of popular romance narratives (5).

### The Terms and Conditions of Happily Ever After

Both *Forbidden Temptation* and *The Broken Kingdoms* demonstrate that when it comes to romance narratives, happily ever after tends to come only under certain terms and conditions. Both texts work with and against conventions of the romance narrative, which have traditionally excluded black and disabled subjects. As a result, by representing black disabled protagonists, these texts often move in and out of potentially stereotypical representational categories. Since the conventions of the romance genre rely so heavily on particular race, (dis)ability, gender, and sexuality norms, and since these norms are contradictory with regard to multiply marginalized subjects, the representation of a black disabled romantic protagonist will inevitably come up against some ableist, racist, sexist, or homophobic stereotype in its attempt to bypass another. *Forbidden Temptation* and *The Broken Kingdoms* may be unable to fully or unproblematically incorporate multiply marginalized subjects, but their negotiation of genre conventions manifests the mutually constitutive relationship of the social systems that uphold and maintain stereotypes. This does not, however, negate that some romance narratives seem to do a better job than others at resisting stereotypes and politicizing their representations in a way that draws readers' attention to the race, (dis)ability,

gender, and sexuality norms that structure the genre. As a text published by a romance novel company, *Forbidden Temptation* is required to conform more strictly to the conventions of the genre, whereas the hybrid genre (fantasy and romance) text of *The Broken Kingdoms* is allowed more fluidity. While there are very few representations of black disabled characters in romance narratives, further research on other multiply marginalized romance narrative protagonists in both more traditional romance narratives and more genre-blending ones will help us further understand the role of particular social norms—especially those of race and (dis)ability, which have been discussed substantially less than gender and sexuality in current romance studies scholarship—in the very structures, conventions, and tropes of the romance narrative genre.

Scholars must further ask, Happily ever after for whom? Whose bodyminds, behaviors, desires, and lives fit within the conventions of this genre and whose do not? How much do authors need to normalize multiply marginalized characters to make them romantic protagonists? How much can authors resist normalization without reinscribing harmful stereotypes when creating these characters? How might engagement with other genres allow for romance narrative plots to shift and incorporate those who are typically excluded? How much can a romance narrative stray from its traditional conventions and still be considered a romance narrative? Is love at the heart of the genre or something else? By looking at the exclusions of the genre, at how multiple marginalized subjects like black, disabled, and black disabled people do and do not quite fit into the existing structures of romance which are shaped by contradictory social norms and stereotypes, we can understand more about the limits and potential of this genre not only as a representational medium, but also as a lens into contemporary sociopolitical structures. If love is the basis of the romance and romance narratives continue to exclude certain populations as romantic actors, this genre reveals much about our societal inability to imagine fully human, livable, and loveable lives for black disabled people and other multiply marginalized subjects.

## Notes

1. Both Jarmakani and Taylor discuss (albeit briefly) the racial segregation of the romance novel publishing industry (Jarmakani 896; Taylor 1036).

2. I use (dis)ability here and in several other places in this article to refer to the overarching system of mental, physical, psychological, and behavioral norms that values certain body-minds and behaviors over others through labels such as ability, disability, competence, capability and so on. I use (dis)ability because unlike terms such as race, which indicates a number of categories, both privileged and oppressed, disability without a parenthetical adjustment only references the marginalized category, not the overarching social system.
3. Margaret Price defines bodymind as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’” (270).
4. See DuCille.
5. For other examples of how subversion of one norm can result in adherence to another, see Wanzo on *The Frog Princess*, Garland-Thomson on the *Share a Smile Becky* Barbie doll and Clare on Ellen Stohl posing for Playboy (Wanzo 2–8; Garland-Thomson 501–02; Clare 103–22).
6. I began my search for black disabled romance narrative protagonists on the Harlequin website and then expanded into GoodReads lists, Amazon.com, and romance novel review websites, blogs, and fan forums.
7. The text seems self-conscious about ensuring this set-up is not interpreted as sexual assault and thus takes pains in this scene and in reflections on it to insist Ruby was not really drunk and knew exactly what she was doing—that the alcohol allowed her to act on desires she already had.
8. See Hobson or Willis.
9. See Schwab or Kamble.

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