

From VEIL AND VOW: MARRIAGE MATTERS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE by Aneeka Ayanna Henderson. Copyright © 2020 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher. www.uncpress.org

Invocation

We are gathered here today
in the presence of friends and loved ones,
to join this man and this woman.

As I rode the train to high school at the ghastly hour of 7 a.m. in Chicago during the 1990s, I grew accustomed to seeing women outfitted in sneakers and notched-collar trench coats, schlepping dog-eared novels with cover art featuring striking images of Black women and men. These novels that peeked out of tote bags and coat pockets on the train platform seemed to emerge in unison as the train departed from the station. The chorus of texts by Terry McMillan, Sandra Kitt, and Sister Souljah, among others, heralded a late twentieth-century reawakening in the African American cultural imagination and revealed that writers and consumers had a keen interest in the representation of African American romance and marriage.

As the women on the train migrated from what I presume to be their suburban homes to their jobs in the city, McMillan also experienced her own migration as her readership expanded, with her work moving from small, cramped corners to vast, lucrative sections in bookstores. McMillan's novels are often categorized as "Romance" in the few remaining brick-and-mortar bookstores that exist, while similar kinds of novels by African American authors are given less profitable real estate in "General Interest" or "African American Fiction" sections. Nevertheless, these hard-and-fast classifications belie the nuanced ways that these novels muddle what constitutes traditional "romance." While they are not prototypical Harlequin texts or titillating bodice-rippers, they use romance tropes, and the protagonists are often in search of a husband or a monogamous partner. References to expensive vehicles, designer handbags, high-priced clothing, and other luxury items are interwoven in the texts, preceding and reflecting the reverence for Jimmy Choo, Manolo Blahnik, and other upscale designers in chick lit and mainstream romance, such as *Sex and the City*.

These accoutrements not only attract a growing middle-class African American readership but provide added pressure for main characters to have successful heteronormative relationships with satisfying endings, culminating in the marriage proposal. Political achievements such as the civil rights movement redouble assumptions about the inevitable marriage proposal, and it is an assumption about African American people that has come to follow a historical pattern. Much like the expectation for wedlock and socioeconomic progress imposed on newly emancipated African American people who found that slavery supposedly could "no longer be blamed for social ills that plagued the black community," political and popular culture suggests that the last definitive hurdle for late twentieth-century African American middle-class protagonists enjoying the spoils of the civil rights movement is securing a monogamous heterosexual relationship.

Many of the late twentieth-century books I saw on the train, such as McMillan's 1989 novel *Disappearing Acts*, employ romance tropes but pivot away from or revise the classic "Reader, I married him" or "happily ever after" (HEA) finale that characterizes romance and chick-lit genres, urging new modes of examining the representation of courtship and marriage in Black cultural production. The uncharacteristic rejection snarls the delicate line between the institution of marriage operating, albeit ostensibly, as a form of protection against racism, sexism, and poverty for some of the most vulnerable

members of society and that same institution working as a mechanism that can make those members more vulnerable to state and intimate partner or domestic violence.

Taking this delicate line as its centerpiece, *Veil and Vow: Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture* argues that portraits of courtship and marriage in the popular and political imaginary are an indispensable mode of reassessing family formation and the ways in which matrimony has become an increasingly politicized endeavor. I “worry” this delicate but jagged line, to use Cheryl Wall’s term, by moving across and between print, sonic, and visual culture to explore what the representation of romance, courtship, and marriage means in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I analyze films such as *The Best Man*, songs by Anita Baker, fiction by McMillan, book covers, and other cultural ephemera. Rather than rehearse the sweeping generalizations in cultural production pronouncing marriage as wholly “good” or “bad,” I read against the grain an archive that registers as supposedly apolitical and unimportant, countering the assumption that romantic desires occupy a space of frivolity and escape. Underexamined and undertheorized, these texts mask the ways in which they have become central to our understanding of late twentieth-and early twenty-first-century African American and American cultural imaginaries.

I build on work by scholars such as Candice M. Jenkins, who argue that the “collection of historical tensions and suppressions surrounding black erotic and domestic behavior suggests . . . that intimacy in general has political significance for black people, and is related to who African Americans are as civic subjects, to the very shape of the black ‘body politic.’ ” In her research on African American literature, Jenkins elucidates the ways in which African American political subjectivity and progress are firmly tethered to the so-called private sphere of domesticity, courtship, and marriage. The nation has used this domain to threaten African American people, but writers have also depicted African American characters ingeniously using the private sphere as a tool for survival. Nevertheless, the use and misuse of these tools spiral and curve across time and space, including to popular forms of creative expression. Belinda Edmondson maintains that broadly defined categories of “romance” and “erotic love” have long “been fraught with social implications for black literature of almost every kind, from ‘serious’ antiracism novels to frothy Hollywood screenplays, from female-authored fiction to male.” Edmondson deftly plots an expansive, pliable conceptualization of “romance” because of its profound social implications for writers and artists navigating antiblackness. I use these theoretical frames as an entry point for analyzing depictions of romance in the late twentieth-and early twenty-first century, a period of time in which black popular culture grew exponentially.

I establish *Veil and Vow*’s methodological intervention through a close reading of print, visual, and sonic culture and by outlining a complex cartography for understanding how political and popular culture express overt and latent anxieties about the institution of marriage. I critically examine these eras and this polyamorous archive precisely because of what their kinship veils and unveils as well as vows and disavows. At the same time that Black popular culture was undergoing a reinvention and its discursive reach was rapidly expanding, it was generating angst about Black women’s subjectivity and family formation in political culture. I demonstrate the ways in which the fast-paced plots by prolific writers such as Sister Souljah (née Lisa Williamson) careen toward the future, but also articulate fears about what the future might mean and bring forth. I unveil the old and new sociopolitical demands for “order” exemplified by legislation such as the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and the ways in which these fictional narratives imaginatively endorse, diffuse, and disavow these pressures.

Political legislation can function as a blunt tool, so I have assembled this triptych of film, fiction, and music because they provide shades of complexity despite glossy packaging and high-spirited plot twists. Situating popular texts against and alongside their political landscape also unsheathes dangerous political handiwork and legislative sleight of hand in the public sphere. This political and cultural consanguinity exposes the discrepancy between the vows that political leaders ask of their constituents and the vows

they pledge to those they consider legitimate citizens. My analysis uncovers the fiction and fairy tale in political policy and the political stakes of fictional texts. The print, sonic, and visual culture that I examine in *Veil and Vow* affords a new opportunity to grapple with old questions, including who is imagined as a citizen—a designation bound to who is imagined as a “wife” and “marriageable.” As I will explain, state apparatuses sanction broad forms of punishment for African American people whether they desire these labels or not. By stitching together cultural studies, African American studies, and feminist studies alongside political debates and landmark policies, this book illuminates the seam binding the ways in which political and popular texts refashion the notion of family.