The Courtship Season: Love, Race, and Elite African American Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

At the turn of the twentieth century, the mythology of romantic love was the core of happiness for elite African American women. It governed courtship, marriage, and family life. Women believed that love produced a happy marriage, and that marriage yielded America's most important social institution—a proper middle-class family. "Love is one of the greatest events in human life, and marriage a duty," wrote one African American culture critic in 1897 (1).

Powerful political leaders endorsed this ideology, with some finding it especially applicable to people of color. William McKinley, the nation's twenty-fifth president, told African American graduates of an industrial school that the loving family and home were the "foundations of good government" (2). Mrs. N.F. Mossell, doyen of Philadelphia's "ebony elite," reiterated the marriage-home-nation connection. Writing in her book The Work of the Afro-American Woman (1894), she announced: "Home is undoubtedly the cornerstone of our beloved Republic . . . Marriage constitutes the basis for the home; preceding this comes courtship . . ." (3).

Courtship and marriage had other monumental ramifications for middle-class African Americans. Marriage was seen as a lifelong experience; divorce was deemed unthinkable because it required embarrassing public testimonies of marital cruelty, intemperance, and/or adultery. Idyllic unions of the ebony upper class, on the other hand, symbolized proper conduct, which was understood as necessary for racial advancement in a racialized nation. The elite believed such marriages countered the racist stereotype that people of color were incapable of loving, sustained relationships. This image of proper married life was so important that W.E.B. DuBois and Nina Gomer, both miserable in their relationship for forty years, remained married. He said they did so for the good of the race. Stable marriages were also seen as models for poorer people of color—"the majority of whom have not made the progress of the elites," wrote journalist Anna Jones (4). At a time when blacks had no rights a white need respect, middle-class African Americans thought symbolic proper marriages would help the race to obtain social goals.

Courtship and marriage were important to this class for another reason. Many were the daughters of exslaves who had been denied the rites of romance and marriage that European Americans took for granted. This included mate selection and the delicate art of wooing. It was not uncommon for slave owners to choose marriage partners for their human chattel. And slave marriages were dissolved at the owner's whim. Late nineteenth-century African American elites, just a generation or so removed from bondage, were aware of such conventions. They treasured their right to select their mates, to court, and to marry.

These African Americans embraced romantic love. To ensure that couples knew what courtship was all about, a cultural arbiter proclaimed: "Courtship is the pro-
cess whereby young people of the opposite sex persuade themselves and each other that they are the complement of the other, and that they should unite in marriage. . . . It is designed that men and women may get well acquainted with those whom they seek to be bound to for life” (9). Writers of advice literature warned women that courting was serious business. It was not just a pleasant pastime, or even worse, a period of flirtation. A woman was selecting a lifelong partner and father of “race children.”

Most late nineteenth-century elite black women did not have this pedantic view of courtship. To them, courtship was the period for intensifying romantic love. Yet in a clear division of reality versus prescriptive literature, experts rarely mentioned romantic love. Never was it listed as the prime ingredient for mate selection. As one author wrote: “This wooing that goes on year after year is not certain to conduce to the happiest marriages” (6). Instead of pitching woo, experts advised couples to study their sweetheart’s religion, health, social class, morality, and character. Compatibility in these areas produced wedded bliss. While it was assumed that love would precede marriage, since lovelessness doomed a permanent union, advice manuals gave no attention to the blind, all consuming passion that characterized romantic love. In fact, The Negro in Etiquette (1890), one of the few books to mention love, said only of that emotion, “Where there is no jealousy there is no love” (7). When discussed in self-help manuals, love was presented as a calm, rational emotion based on esteem. More importantly, it was just one of several factors to be considered in mate selection.

Guide books offered requisite characteristics for the perfect mate. These manuals preached an ideology that attributed gender-specific qualities to an ideal partner. The best traits in a woman, for example, emanated from her function in life. A popular African American journalist reminded readers that, “since God made Eve in the fair gardens of paradise as a helpmate unto Adam, it has been woman’s task to aid man” (8). She could do this best by being pleasant and having good homemaking skills, wrote another expert. Additionally, gender rules demanded that she be practical, tidy, industrious, modest, affectionate, and steady. Good sense and a sweetness of temper were also required. Along with these requisites, the future wife of a race man had to demonstrate integrity, education, intelligence, eloquence of language, and musical talent. The latter two were of grave importance. They were to be inherited by her middle-class babies.

These perfect wives would mother a generation of perfect children. Bishop Daniel A. Payne of the African Methodist church—the first religious denomination for people of color—proclaimed that America’s racial climate dictated special training for African American youth. Blacks would not be treated as other Americans until the race improved and improvement began in the cradle. Reiterating that racial uplift began in the home of the middle-class wife, Mrs. M. E. Lee wrote in a church journal: “If we Afro-Americans are successful enough to some day measure up equally with the Anglo-Americans, let us not ignore the fact that we owe it chiefly to the unselfish efforts of our mothers” (9). By raising exemplary children, elite wives performed a service for the race, for, by their very nature, these children would dissolve racism.

Many advice books warned women not to marry for money. While they were expected to consider whether a suitor possessed sufficient means, marrying for money, wrote one author of color, was an insult to nature. But another advice giver dissented, stating that in the every day world, “real love—or ambition in its various guises may be the basis of marriage” (10).

During the courtship season, elite women were to accept attention from no one who was not a “Christian Gentleman.” Such men were not only religious, they were industrious, highly respectable, brilliantly educated, well trained, and extremely polished. The Christian Gentleman was an asset in the best society, kept company only with refined young Christian people, and would encourage his wife in her good deeds and thoughts. Advice books also described men that women should never consider for a love match. Such rakes were intemperate in their use of alcohol and tobacco, and engaged in licentiousness in every form. They swore and kept late hours. Men who flirted, who were in poor health, who were fashion dandies, who teased women, or who had a domineering manner were certainly to be avoided.

The evidence suggests that many elite romances were long distance affairs, and that they were conducted primarily through the mail. Ida B. Wells, who became famous for her antilynching crusade, wrote numerous male admirers in different cities during the 1880s. In the 1890s, Alice Ruth Moore of New Orleans and later Massachusetts, corresponded with the rising poet Paul Laurence Dunbar for two years before they even saw each other. The night they finally met, he proposed. Lugenia Burns in Chicago exchanged letters with John Hope in Atlanta in the 1890s. They courted by mail for five years.
Hope, an African American graduate of Brown University, visited Lugenia three times a year—Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations. Many elite African American women worked as teachers in the South and Midwest. Since their locations were not always the best for mate selection, they relied on letters to initiate and sustain romances.

The art of correspondence was so important that special books called "letter-writers" developed. They included sample love letters. A young school master commented on one in his journal: "One of my girls got me to read a love letter to her today. It was a proposal of marriage from a young [South Carolina] chap, and nearly all of it was copied verbatim from a letter-writer" (11).

Love poems were essential components of passionate letters. Couples with little or no talent exchanged original rhymes. A Denver lawyer courting Azalia Smith of Detroit offered this atrocious bit:

O sweet Azalia,
But deem me dumb in joyous trance
For all my speechless senses
Turn rapture at thy glance (12)

When long distance romances turned serious, ladies sent love tokens in their letters. Locks of hair and photographs were favorites. Recipients treasured them. On receiving his token, the author Charles Chesnutt wrote fervently in his diary: "Here is a lock of her hair! I kiss it the lock of hair and press it to [my] bosom[,] Would that it were she" (13).

Elite women looked for love during courtship season. But romance was tempered by racial aspirations and class. Women were expected to make amorous, but respectable matches, for a good marriage was useful propaganda in the war for equal rights. ☐

Endnotes
8. Tillman Davis, 47.
10. Mossell, 117.
13. Chesnutt, 68.

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