

Interracial Romance Flipping Stereotypes or Appropriating Culture?

By PAIJ WADLEY-BAILEY

It is important to note at the outset that Gwendolyn Bikis' *Your Loving Arms* is a love story. It is the story of Beth (white, troubled, newly released from jail, battling memories of her history of abuse from her family) and Tammy (African-American, gentle, connected with her family) – two young women who met in college and fell in love.

With that backdrop, the two women, alternating, share their stories. Beth shares her life of running away, sharing her experiences within the African-American community. Because she has been so damaged by her white family, she at times believes that she hates white people. As the book goes on, Beth's constant use of slang and African-American vernacular speech becomes annoying: it is as if the author is trying to convince her audience that she really does "get" African-American people.

This is one of my first inklings that the author has no clue that she is appropriating African-American vernacular in this instance. It reminds me of racist writer / poet / songwriter Al Jolson telling the world stories about how the slaves felt so good about being stolen, exploited, raped, separated from family ... and white supremacist history is still going on, obviously even in our lesbian community!

Author Gwendolyn Bikis does

Your Loving Arms

By Gwendolyn Bikis
Alice Street Editions,
An imprint of Haworth Press
Released 2002.

not get in touch with Beth's humanity with any integrity that I, an African-American bulldagger can see (a bulldagger is a [black] lesbian, who was among the first bull herders and rodeo performers in the Old West. "Bulldoggers" was feminized by dropping the "o" and adding an "a."). The fact that the book is a "love story" does not release her from the moral obligation of taking on racism as one of the biggest diseases facing Beth, Beth's community, the entire nation, and the world. And I say, in the African-American vernacular (because it brings an emphasis that only this vernacular can conjure) – what's up with that?

I have yet to learn of any "black and white" couple who does not struggle with issues of race, in Vermont or elsewhere, be they straight or queer. I, personally, have had lesbian partners, experiences which have been – and memories still are – exceptional. Our biggest issue was racism – first of all, because the biggest institution in our nation – and therefore the world – is racism.

This institutionalism, of course, permeates our lives – our personal, social, political, economical, even reli-

gious lives. The additional layer for "black and white" couples is the denial that racism exists within the relationship while subtle and overt racist behaviors exist – some out of ignorance, some out of meanness, some when other emotional baggage has not been processed. It is almost inherent between "blacks" and "whites" where people of European descent just cannot – just cannot – hear what a person of color has to say, and blatantly negate that experience. And then get "upset" when the person of color suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from having her entire existence erased, made invisible, negated, disrespected, debilitated, destroyed.

The diseases of sexism, classism, ageism, adultism, mentalism, ableism, looksism, homophobia ... all have this element in common. I don't understand, however, why it is perpetuated by the very people who are being victimized by these isms in our LGBTQQA community.

Granted, I do not know the extent to which the publishers play a part here – books must get "sold" – nor do we learn to what extent Bikis plays into managing and controlling information and a position that has her appropriating – misappropriating – information and perpetuating the slave-owner/white supremacist attitude that anything that comes from ALANA people (African, Latin, Asian, Native American) is "up for grabs" – that

is, something to which those of European descent have a "god-given right."

Would this book have been written differently had she invited an African-American bulldagger to co-write the book? *Should* the book have been co-authored? I believe so. Remember when Adrienne Rich would almost always bring a writer-of-color with her to presentations – share the podium? I always liked and respected that kind of political message.

Back to the story.

Tammy, though connected with her family, has some difficulties with family members, has known her share of strife, and her descriptions of racist incidents are powerful. She truly loves Beth. Even so, racism has filtered her outlook. When Tammy learns that Beth has been arrested yet again, she turns introspective and critiques Beth's "being in trouble": "Trouble is fun to them; trouble is something they go looking for, and they can't handle when they get it. Trouble's meant for other, not-White lives, so that when they have it, all of a sudden life ain't fair."

Tammy has led a life that does – and should – garner sympathy. Nobody says "I want to be a prisoner when I grow up." Nobody. Society rarely hears about a woman of European descent with a history of alcoholism, violence, dysfunctional family, poverty, prison time. In this novel it is the African-American lesbian who has love from family, financial stability, race pride. Beth is dealing with what she sees – what she believes she sees. She is dealing with a deck of cards that lacks political analysis, a history of poverty, how poverty works. Importantly, she brings out the fact of differing definitions

of "trouble" between people of color and people of European descent.

The love between the two women culminates in a "trust-building" scene in which Tammy allows Beth to cut her hair. For Beth, this means "[I]f there's any hope for us, our trust will have to equal out. If she lets me cut her hair, she might make me her sister. Our reliance will be mutual and natural." Beth opens a door to more of her culture, that of the spiritual meditation of "doing hair." Beth does not explain or intellectualize this, she merely "does it." And, Beth expects that this ritual will cement the relationship in a way that transcends some of the elements of racism: self-hatred, distrust, poverty, appropriation, profiling, addiction, hatred by society/institutions ...

The book on some level is a dream, a vision of what could be. I am glad that Gwendolyn Bikis wrote the book. Perhaps it will spark more books on such an important issue: crossing the color line. Perhaps it will give birth to books co-written by a woman of European descent and a Woman of Color. Perhaps the books will spark more formal debate in our communities. Perhaps they will have more people coming to the table with the courage to speak honestly on the issue and take us out of our comfort zones in order to become more inclusive in our thinking and acting. Perhaps a whole values clarification movement might be sparked from the addition of more of these writings. Perhaps ... ▼

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